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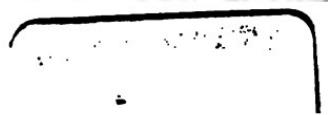
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VENUS IN THE EAST
WALLACE IRWIN





1



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING—YOU LITTLE BOUNDER?"

VENUS IN THE EAST

BY

WALLACE IRWIN

AUTHOR OF "PILGRIMS INTO FOLLY,"

"LETTERS OF A JAPANESE SCHOOLBOY," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
MAY WILSON PRESTON

NEW  YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY



ILLUSTRATIONS

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING—YOU LITTLE BOUNDER?"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	PAGE
AS THE KNEELING KNIGHT OFFERED HIS COLLECTION SHE LOOKED HIM STRAIGHT IN THE EYE. "OH, YOU DO LOOK FUNNY!" SHE GIGGLED	36
HER NAME WAS DORIS, AND SHE HAD EVIDENTLY INHERITED HER EYEBROWS FROM HER MOTHER	60
"HAVE YOU GOT ANYTHING TO PROVE THAT YOU'RE A GENUINE ENGLISH VALET?"	78
"WHAT ARE THESE OVERBEEKS? MERE UPSTARTS. MERE NEW-COMING PEOPLE. WHERE DID THEY MAKE TOO MUCH MONEY? SOME VULGARIAN STOLE A RAILROAD. V'LA! THAT IS AMERICA"	134
A LOUD-VOICED HERALD SHOUTED BUDDY'S NAME AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS, WHERE STOOD MRS. VAN LAERENS WEARING A THOUSAND-DOLLAR GOWN IN A WAY TO CONCEAL ITS VALUE	200
"BUDDY, MY BOY, WE'RE BROTHERS-IN-LAW IN SORROW" . . .	248
"HOW DO YOU DO, MARQUISE?" HE INQUIRED CORDIALLY . . .	290



300

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VENUS IN THE EAST



VENUS IN 'THE EAST

I

IT was just after sunset and Venus, star of evening, was still keeping her pallid distance in the sky when Doc Naylor made his last pilgrimage to Buddy McNair and his little assay office up the gulch. On the morrow, at seven A. M., Axe Creek, Colorado, was to lose its most original, best known and possibly richest citizen; and as Doc Naylor, fat and hugely swaddled against the cold, mashed his way through the snow toward the box of a building that had served so long as both boudoir and laboratory for a great metallurgical discoverer the clumsy big-hearted cynic was hesitating for a medium through which to express his emotions. Laughter or tears? Both, possibly.

When he burst open the front door and found Buddy standing stiffly in the middle of the room amidst a litter of cracked crucibles, bone-ash cupels and broken slag the Doc decided instantly that it was to laugh. For Buddy had gotten into his new travelling clothes and was preparing a dress rehearsal for the Doc's special benefit. Buddy had always wanted a blue suit, and it was obvious, even to old Naylor's none too subtle colour sense, that Buddy had gone at it with his usual thoroughness, and accomplished his ambition; for the loose-hanging creation, which he had brought up this very morning from the Fashion Store, across from the Texas Star Hotel, presented all the bril-

liancy of a chemical fire. Yellow shoes, fancifully trimmed with buttons to match, a cravat of daintiest lavender, a hat of bowler type somewhat tight in the band, a very tall double collar and a slippery satin shirt combined to disguise the exterior Buddy as something he wasn't and never had been.

Doc Naylor gave three long snorts, his great body shaking like a bale of cotton in an earthquake.

"Great Scott—don't know you! Don't want to know you!" he spluttered, wiping his spectacles as he tried to visualise the old corduroys and downtrodden swamper's boots which had characterised Buddy McNair.

"My card!" grinned Buddy, and somewhat inexpertly fumbling he brought out several, blew away the tissue paper and handed one to his caller.

"Mr. Gilbert Kernochan McNair!" read Doc Naylor. "Huh! So that's what you'll be as you saunter through marble halls jostling the rich and great."

"Don't I look the part?" to-morrow's adventurer inquired nervously.

"I hope the first six confidence men who see you fall to quarrelling among themselves."

"Great Henry!" Buddy had a panic-stricken feeling. An east-bound train was soon to tear him away from this rough, jagged and protective old rock to which he had clung so long that it had become a habit of his life.

Matters of business, important to both Naylor and McNair, were to be discussed at this sitting. Buddy's profitable relinquishment of his share in the Virginia Super-cyanide Mill had promoted the Doc to its management. So the conference waited only for Buddy to cast aside his glorious coat, revealing more glorious shirt sleeves. Then the two took chairs, propped their feet on the old work-

bench before the dusty window and went at it hammer and tongs.

Buddy knew nothing about business, but he knew all about the Supercyanide Process of Gold Reduction, because he had invented it. No matter how rapidly the machine gun in Doc Naylor's brain rattled off its questions Buddy was there to pop back his replies. It was a practical unsentimental talk, behind which Doc Naylor was aching to inquire into Buddy McNair's real reasons for taking all his money in a lump and striking out for New York.

"Well," the old sage summed it up at last, "you've sold your share here for a quarter of a million. Bonyear & Cole are holding that for you in New York; and they've collected besides a half year's royalties on your patent all over the mining world. Somebody's got to take care of you in the East. Bonyear's active New York representative is that human summer squash, Pontius Blint, who came here last year to close the deal for them. He's honest, I guess, and he's rich and he knows New York. Throw yourself on his mercy as soon as you get there. Otherwise anything might happen to you."

Buddy leaned his elbows on the table and gazed westward. Mountain twilight had settled down, the interior of the assay office was black, the cooling coke ovens glowed dimly, the two men's faces showed as patches of white. In the obscurity Doc Naylor picked up courage to speak out.

"Just why are you going East, Buddy?"

Down the cañon in the deep crotch between snowy mountains Buddy could see the evening star snapping with electric brilliancy in a gory spot of sunset. "I've sort of taken a notion to follow that star," he admitted at last in a constrained tone.

There were two pairs of elbows on the table now as beyond the mountain silence trouble-giving Hesperus touched the tallest pine, sank, disappeared.

"Well, Doc?" suggested Buddy at last.

"You always were a damn fool," explained Doc Naylor pleasantly. "And I suppose that accounts for some of your charm—which I have to take other people's word for—and all of your crazy success. You've given the world the Supercyanide Process merely because you didn't have sense enough to know it couldn't be done. Your specialty is the scientifically impossible. By insulting the laws of chemical reaction you've gone and cleaned up what I suppose will amount to half a dozen millions of dollars, sooner or later. And now you propose to go East by way of the evening star."

"Is that pretty nutty?" asked Buddy, with the chastened look he always gave the man who had guided him through his precarious years.

"Not for you," Naylor affectionately assured him. "Of course it defies physics, astronomy, geography, astrology and the time-tables of the D. & R. G. But then—"

"What's the idea?"

"Going to New York, aren't you?"

"Take the spur to Colorado Springs at seven A. M., change to main line at eleven-forty-six," he recited the figures he had carefully committed to memory.

"Let me tell you. Venus, which you have just picked out as the lodestar of your future, doesn't travel on that track. She's off right now for the Pacific Coast. Of course if you want to go to New York via San Francisco, Nagasaki, Petrograd and Paris—"

"You always were a literal-minded cuss. I was just trying to express an idea."

"Ideas are your curse," gloomed the fat man. "Who ever told you to pack your trunk and follow Venus?"

"My father," said Buddy McNair, clearing his throat.

It was as though the old man's ghost had sifted in from the starlit snows outside. Never before had Naylor heard him mention the consumptive eccentric who had dropped dead in a snow pile opposite the Palace Saloon nearly twenty years ago; yet still lingered the legend of a skinny pundit with a Dublin accent who had brought a small boy and a bale of books into camp, had mopped up under tables and shared the title of professor with a mixed-ale pugilist.

"Yes," drawled Buddy McNair, looking into the sunset fires, which had now died lower than his coke ovens, "there's some of the old gentleman in me, I guess."

Doc Naylor sat perfectly still. He had known reticent men to unburden themselves like this in hours of waiting before a wedding or a funeral.

"I never knew whether he was too small for the Rocky Mountains or too big. He ran away from civilisation because he couldn't stand it. Then he came here and beat his brains out because it wasn't civilised. He was a gentleman and a scholar and the wisest man that never knew what to do with his life. If it hadn't been for him there never would have been any Supercyanide Process."

"He didn't invent the formula?" asked Naylor curiously.

"I might almost say he did. When I was a kid he used to take me over to the dumps out back of the Virginia mill and show me millions of tons of mud that had been thrown into the discard. 'Two or three dollars' worth of gold in every ton,' he'd say. 'We've got to whet Cyanide's appetite so he'll eat all the gold.' He started working on a formula before he died. It was no good, but it set me thinking."

"And this Venus idea—that was his too?"

"Dad had a passion for finding the trouble with things he couldn't cure," acknowledged Buddy.

"He should have been a diagnostician," said the retired medical man.

"I guess so. He used to sit on a big rock and hum to himself as he watched Mistress Venus slide down behind the trees. 'That girl Venus,' he used to say, 'always looks wrong to me up here. She ought to be in the East; she's so dressy and *chic* and highly polished, so brilliant and civilised. We've got to change that, too, Buddy!'"

"So you're going to New York," mused the doctor. "Well, Axe Creek is no place to spend a hundred thousand a year on, unless you want to build more cyanide mills."

"I just sold one," Buddy pointed out, "and there's no use putting the money back into the Rocky Mountains. Doc, it's just this: I want to spend my money on the best that money can buy. Maybe that won't appeal to you, because I've a notion you went through some of that before you came West. You've shot your arrow."

"I'll admit it," agreed Naylor, not without regret.

"Well, I haven't. I don't mean I've got any longing to go live on a roof garden and hire a nigger to spray me with wine out of a hose. But I'm thirty-seven now; pretty soon I'll be forty and past enjoying life."

"A schoolboy thought!" grinned the old doctor.

"It won't do me any good hanging round Axe Creek dripping gold out of the holes in my pockets. I'm not such a darned snob, Doc," he pleaded. "Any of the boys round the camp would do the same under the circumstances. Only they might not go at it so thoroughly."

"Well, what's so superior about your programme?" the Doc obliged him.

"I'm going to get in with the big people of the world. The ones that make the wheels go round, that make pearls

and caviar and grand opera pay. The kind whose pictures and dogs' pictures and babies' pictures fill up the Sunday papers; that are so much somebody that it matters more whether their bridesmaids carry orchids or roses than it does whether an ordinary citizen lives eighty years or dies of catalepsy at the age of twenty-one. I've got the price of admission and I want to get in—with the best!"

"And he got it all out of the Sunday supplements!" Doc Naylor whistled. He might have been whistling to a little dog he left back in New York a decade before, so far away and impersonal was the almost unmusical note.

"I suppose you intend to marry into the American peerage?" he growled at last.

"I'm game for anything," Buddy modestly allowed.

"My boy," the doctor said gravely, "you haven't been beyond Denver since you were a baby."

"And only twice there. The last time I played poker and came back in a freight car."

"Hm!" The growl came forebodingly out of the dark. "Your New York representatives have piled your money in a bin for you. All you want now is a shovel."

"You think I'm a bum business man?" Buddy felt cold.

"About as good as most poets. But you'd better fasten yourself to Pontius Blint and never leave him long enough to get a shave."

"I guess I can afford a few bumps," boasted the new-made capitalist.

"Buddy, I'm going to tell you something about money." Doc Naylor took a limp cigarette from his side pocket, lighted it and inhaled. "We're all tired hearing the fogies say that wise men make money for fools to spend. In your case you're both the wise man and the fool—a bad combination. I had a little money and lived in New York myself once upon a time; and as I look back on it all now

I believe I've found out a few things. Really to enjoy money you've got to have laid a foundation in knowledge of what things are worth. Houses and everything else have to be built from the foundation up. There's no use choosing pretty wall paper first, then trying to hang the bricks on it. Happiness is a matter of good investment. The reason money—some money—doesn't bring happiness is because it has been invested in fake happiness. A million dollars spent in foolishness brings in dividends—in headaches."

"You're another one of those darned diagnosticians."

"A pretty poor one. But if I had time to take you East I'd show you what I mean. Better change your star from Venus to Jupiter."

Buddy didn't answer. Instead he struck a match and applied it to a kerosene lamp, under whose illumination Doc Naylor took another opportunity to study this man who so engaged his affections and who so consistently puzzled him. Even the naively planned store clothes of Axe Creek became Buddy McNair and added to his charm. He wasn't tall—rather a hair's breadth under medium height. His quaint sunburned face showed a deep dimple at the corner of the mouth; his eyes were small, black and melancholy; his nose was low-bridged and sharp, his ears peaked. It was an irregular, fine-grained, impertinent, shy, likable countenance which Buddy McNair carried round the room with him, peering into bins, drawers and cubby-holes in the search for further relics to pack into his East-going trunk.

"Now, what do you think this is?" he chuckled as he fished a pearl-handled curio out from under an ancient pile of ore samples.

"Looks a lot like a six-shooter," confessed the Doc.

"Old Hod Wing's gun!" grinned the assayer as he

turned the rusty cylinder under his thumb. "He must have left it behind the day he skipped to California."

The criminal details of Mr. Wing's skipping do not concern this story.

"Want it?" Buddy offered the weapon, handle first.

"What for? Why not take it East with you?"

"I never toted a gun. Probably I'd shoot myself in the foot, if the old crowbar'll go off."

"Take it anyhow," persisted the oracle. "Otherwise how will New York know you're a Westerner?"

Awkwardly Buddy slid it into his pocket.

"Guess it's no good," he protested. "Hod never left anything valuable behind."

Upon the word a tremendous banging at the door caused the two men to leap guiltily apart.

"Come in!" yelled the assayer above the thunders.

Out of the dimness a spectre materialised and advanced into the room. Bent, bow-legged, very dirty, a long white beard sprouting from a face that seemed too small to support so dense a forest, he stood gazing gimlet-sharp through the veil of his overhanging eyebrows. It was Shaggy Keenan, the lone prospector, Axe Creek's best tourist exhibit.

"Just in time for the funeral!" grinned Buddy.

"Ain't dead yit," squeaked the little short-winded voice. "Gosh-amighty, dressed like a French dook!"

"Have a cigar," suggested Buddy, noting Doc Naylor's trouble-breeding smile.

Shaggy took the cigar and crammed it into his pocket, never permitting his piercing gaze to rove.

"I'm an old man, I am," he boasted, "and I seen nearly everythin' comin' an' goin'."

"You've seen a darned sight more than I have," cheerfully conceded the object of Shaggy's visitation.

"Almost everybody has," cut in Naylor.

Mr. Keenan's tiny jaw chewed busily behind its bush.
"Thank you, Uncle Shag."

Buddy wanted to get back to his packing, but the lone prospector had come to have his say. He collected his slow wits, then pointed shakingly.

"Once," he quavered in a singsong, "I cleaned up nine hundred dollars, all in a chunk. And I lit out for Denver. And I almost got there. And I met up with a dame—"

"Hi, Shag!" bawled Buddy, hoping to distract him from the theme which Mr. Keenan had repeated until everybody knew it by heart. "Cut it short and I'll give you a hundred dollars rebate on that nine."

"Hey?" Shaggy limped a step nearer.

Buddy brought a fat wallet from an inner pocket of his new coat and was shaking out a fresh bank note.

"Tomfoolery!" snarled the old man, clutching avidly.

"I guess I owe it to you."

"You're a liar."

Without another word Shaggy crammed the bill in a hip pocket, turned and shambled out of the door.

"He comes; he goes." Doc Naylor shook like a jelly.

"What's the old banshee wailing about?" asked Buddy, staring after the vanished apparition.

"Dames!" gurgled Naylor. "He lit out for Denver. And he almost got there. And he met up with a dame. The handwriting on the wall. Daniel at Belshazzar's cabaret—"

"Dry up!" commanded his disciple. "What in Sam Hill have I got to do with dames?"

"Just as much as Napoleon, Samson and the two Anthonys, Mark and Saint."

"By the way the camp's moaning you'd think I was going East to be executed."

"You're perfectly helpless," persisted the tormentor. "You never had any money before and now you're off in a cloud of gold dust. Trouble ahead, old son!"

"You mean dames?"

"Precisely that."

"Huh. I'm through, Doc—through! That little Swede in the Pansy Varieties——"

"You've just begun. You're going East by the Venus route—and Venus is the planet of dames."

"Nothing like it."

Even as he protested so vigorously his mind strayed guiltily again to the Sunday-supplement illustration secreted behind rosebud-calico curtains in his lean-to bedroom. Whose face stared from that page to lure him into unknown seas where sirens whanged their golden harps?

"How much money have you got in that wallet?" The kindly cynic tones cut into his reflections.

"There's eleven thousand five hundred left," confessed the schoolboy to his master.

"What for?"

"Travelling expenses."

"You'll need fifty dollars for food and tips. You've got your ticket."

"Yep. And there's a wagonload of loose change in my clothes besides."

"With any definite object in view?"

"I want to travel rich."

"You'll travel poor at that rate. Look here, Bud, better hand me over that roll. I'll let you have a hundred—that's fifty more than you need."

"Not on your life!" Buddy folded his coat and sat on it. "You can't tell what'll happen on the road."

"I can tell you one thing that'll happen: You're going to meet up with a dame."

"I suppose you've got money that says I will?" asked Buddy in his gentlest poker voice.

"I'll invest a month's salary on it," said the Doc, rising ponderously and shaking his trousers over fat ankles.

"Name your proposition."

Matters were taking on an amusing turn, thought Buddy.

"Well, I'll lay five hundred that you'll be stung for that roll, or part of it—and by a woman—before you reach Denver."

"Put your wages in the bank," pleaded Buddy. "I don't need 'em. There may be hard times ahead."

"This isn't a bet—it's an investment."

"Who's a damn fool now?" asked Fortunatus. "I'll tell you what—I'll cover your five hundred with a thousand."

"Even or nothing. Let others rob you."

"Do you realise that it's less than three hours between Colorado Springs and Denver?"

"Dames are speedy workers."

"Oh well, if you're determined to throw money at me," said Buddy with reluctance, "I'll take you on."

Naylor consulted his watch—a way he had when things were all settled.

"Supper at the boarding house?" he asked, his hand on the door latch.

"Got to stick round. Mrs. Carey's sending over a dish of stew."

"I'll send Gowan's bobsled for you at six in the morning," the fat man promised. "I'll take you to the station—see you aren't robbed before you get off."

He swung out into the snowy path. Buddy McNair experienced a curious swelling of the tonsils. He felt for a moment like a very small boy deserted by a gruff and kindly parent.

And it seemed a crime, on their day of parting, to trick

poor Doc out of the money for which he slaved so faithfully.

At ten o'clock Buddy took his lamp back into his lean-to bedroom and placed it on the marble-topped table, which he had once regarded as all too luxurious for his means. He had built this addition himself, shingled it with strips beaten out from tin cans; the exotic wall paper, figured with purple urns suspended on blue smilax, he had chosen and hung. Reflectively he seated himself on his narrow iron bed and removed the yellow shoes, which were beginning to pinch him. His well-strapped trunk sat in the middle of the floor. Above the washstand outfit in a far corner those rosebud-calico curtains swung limply across his shrine, whither strayed his eyes as excited reflections progressed. Doctor Naylor was a pretty smooth old analyst, but he lacked understanding. How in the world could Buddy have told him or any one else just why he was going East? The thousand little odd reasons, fusing unwillingly into one, were as yet embryonic in Buddy's keen, dreaming mind. Condemned at their birth as idiots, fools and weaklings, the little reasons pulled, pulled, pulled together, blending, growing, colouring—their pulling company was stronger than he.

He shuffled in his sock-clad feet over to the rosebud curtains and pulled them aside so that the divinity stood plainly revealed. A sheet from one of New York's most ardent Sunday supplements, several months old, had been tacked to the wall directly above the water pitcher. At the top of the page stood one shockingly large and black interrogation point, round which gambolled many impudent questions in fanciful lettering:

What Star Guides Society Queen?

What Heart Shall Win Lady of the Pearls?

Divorced, Royally Courted, Will Mrs. Pat Dyvenot Wed Again?

Below, the subject of so much conjecture, Mrs. Pat Dyvenot was presented. The newspaper illustrator had framed her ingeniously in a five-pointed star, four points of which had been supplied with heart-shaped windows through which her lovers peered. She was slender as a lily, and as white and as proud. Even the art of soft-paper printing could not make her other than beautiful; her long narrow eyes seemed to look out with an air of triumphant mystery; possibly the bad printing was responsible for her unfathomable gaze. A necklace of large pearl beads with a dot of white in the centre of each hung in two strands over her breast. From the lower left point of the star which the newspaper illustrator had so carefully drawn round her the cruel comely face of her ex-husband, Pat Dyvenot, peered forth; from the lower right stared the fat, bald Prince Kulik, of Bulgaria; from the upper left Tom Wheedel, polo player; from the upper right Terrill Overbeek showed a patch of the very hunting costume he had worn into Axe Creek for a serio-comic adventure. There was also a heart-shaped window at the top of the star, but it was unoccupied save for one small impertinent question mark.

Coiled ingeniously round the entire composition was an exact-size reproduction of the famous Overbeek pearls, the necklace which Mrs. Dyvenot wore in the picture and which, if you had taken the trouble to read the accompanying article, you would have realised had caused the rumour of her engagement to Terry Overbeek.

Buddy McNair looked morosely at his treasure; morbidly he took in the vacant question-marked frame at the top of the star—the unknown place in Mrs. Dyvenot's heart. Then he tore the paper from its tacks and crumpled

it in his hands. After all, Doc Naylor knew less than nothing about the subject, talk as he might. And it was rumoured that Terry Overbeek's heart had won to the centre of the star. Well, if he wasn't any better shot at ladies than at other species of dangerous game——

Upon second thought Buddy straightened out the rumpled page and folded it into a corner of his travelling bag.

When he had finished undressing he blew out the light and grinned in his pillow with the guilty memory of the crime at which he had been both witness and executioner and whose blood must forever smear the illustrious name of Terrill Overbeek.

That newspaper page, that dark and violent deed upon a lonely mountain side! How were they mingled now in the mind of Buddy McNair, tossing on the eve of a golden adventure!

If Terrill Overbeek, proclaimed on three continents as international sportsman, huntsman, clubman, heir to one of America's famous fortunes, had not wandered into Axe Creek and wandered out at a time when Buddy's luck was beginning to turn, then had the obscure assayer never become inoculated with the Overbeek virus. And there had been a secret treaty between these two ill-met ambassadors—a gentleman's agreement over a corpse that still bled warm and twitched a little.

On whose conscience lay that innocent blood? Buddy and Terry, thousands of miles apart, had passed the buck, no doubt. Together they had kept the hideous secret.

It was in the fall of the year, three autumns before the present adventures, that Terry Overbeek's princely camping outfit had strayed into Axe Creek and established itself up the gulch. From the steps of his assay office Buddy had seen the miracle and remarked to himself that it looked like

some surpassingly prosperous wagon show ; and it had been natural to conclude that Overbeek—whose name Gowan, the storekeeper, had already heralded through the camp—was taking advantage of the week's open season for deer.

Overbeek himself, looking the favourite of fortune which a generation of society reporters had proclaimed him, strolled into Buddy's assay office on the day of his arrival and asked for a guide. He was a slightly built man, a little taller than Buddy, and all his features had seemed to curl upward as though wealth had adorned him inside as well as out. His hair and moustache were curly, and the nose that lay between was insignificant; his forehead bulged, so did his oyster-coloured eyes.

Naturally curious as to this blessed being who, together with his relatives and in-laws, contributed so much sprightly and plutocratic gossip to our democratic Sunday supplements, Buddy gave him careful inspection. His hunting boots were of remarkable buckskin, to match a leathery waistcoat. His necktie was a symphony of outing shades. He didn't amount to much, Buddy concluded, and decided to be kind.

"I'm told that you are an excellent guide, Buddy," Overbeek had begun in his soft-spoken way.

"You bet I am, Terry," the excellent guide had responded, not to be outdone in cordiality.

This was breaking the ice with dynamite, but it worked unexpectedly well. It was Buddy this and Terry that for the rest of their adventure. Buddy made a mental note to the effect that Terry had been everywhere and seen very little. He was over forty, yet there was something under-developed about him—a perpetual schoolboy in experience. Later years were to show Buddy McNair how wrong he had been in this snap judgment.

Terry never forgot the splendour of Overbeek's camp as he

looked it over preparatory to a three-burro expedition across the Little Divide. It was like the establishment of a travelling sultan, all under canvas—portable kitchens, chairs, tables, tubs, dining rooms. There were bowings and scrapings from a corps of English servants disguised as *courriers du bois*, nimble to supply the great man's every want. From that day on Buddy had sneakingly pined for an English valet. It must be wonderful to have your boots pulled on so caressingly.

"You'll have to leave this Shah of Persia outfit behind," Buddy had decreed. "The Panhandle trail is so crooked it would break a rattlesnake's neck. We can sling grub for a week on three pack saddles."

Overbeek had replied that he had thought he was rather roughing it, don't you know, as it was.

Roughing it! He roughed it with an English valet! He never did or said anything of importance, yet he could hire men to make him seem important and lo—he was important! No vaulting achievement in art, no service to the state, no discovery in science could have created that atmosphere of splendour which surrounded this ineffectual weak-willed man who roughed it under a tentage that covered an acre of ground.

But he had yielded with the grace of a good sportsman. And it was in the preliminary packing that Buddy had gotten his first glimpse of Mrs. Pat Dyvenot.

She had tumbled at his feet out of a pile of duffel bags that a servant was unpacking for the night. All in her pretty leather travelling frame she lay helpless on the floor, gazing with the coolness peculiar to photographs; and the Axe Creek boy, who had never before seen a woman just like that, marvelled that they could be so perfect. Straight and white as a lily she had gazed up at him; and as bloodless, possibly. He wasn't sure. He had picked her up

from the ground and hadn't been aware of his impertinence until Overbeek had stretched out an impatient hand.

"Give it to me, if you don't mind."

Buddy had been sorry. It had dawned upon him that he had been taking liberties with Terry's best girl.

Yet she had looked out at Buddy McNair, a picture of gentle civilised perfection, something more than knowledge in her mysterious eyes, something less than a smile on her smooth lips. And Overbeek, lord of material things, had commanded Buddy to give her to him, if he didn't mind.

That was it—money and position had given him the right. Queerly enough his father's whimsical essay on the planet Venus came back to Buddy:

"So dressy and chic and highly polished, so brilliant and civilised!"

They had gotten away at sunrise next morning and the light of noon was sifting through the scrub pines when Fate overtook them. They had rounded a bend in the trail, Buddy had stopped the rearmost jack to shift his rifle on the pack, Overbeek was scouting off in tangents, his gun and his manner both absurdly alert in consideration of the fact that deer were still a day's journey away. It was either fortunate or unfortunate, according to your point of view, that Buddy had unstrapped his rifle at the instant he looked up and comprehended the terrific tableau.

For Overbeek, his weapon at half shoulder, was walking gingerly round a mossy rock. Less than twenty feet ahead of him a brownish patch of fur bobbed methodically. Upon inspection the patch developed into a full-size cinnamon bear, and his engrossing occupation was plain to be seen: he was rolling a rotten log under his forepaw while his long nose searched under the bark for luscious white grubs. Buddy's first instinct was to save the situation.

Therefore he put his tongue to his teeth and uttered a piercing whistle.

The effect was instantaneous, startling, horrible. Overbeek leaped as though stung by a bee. He caught sight of the bear at the same moment the bear caught sight of Overbeek. A frozen silence. Slowly the clumsy animal raised himself, turned round twice in a curious dancing step, opened his paws and his jaws at the same moment, and advanced on the international sportsman, who stood hypnotised like a mouse before a cobra. Then his gun quavered to his shoulder.

"Don't shoot!" howled Buddy down the echoing glen.

Forever afterward the picture was photographed in Buddy's mind, the awful look on Overbeek's face as he took wobbly aim. The gun crashed like a cannon. It must have missed, for the bear stood a moment, his face registering disappointment, surprise, indignation. Then he got down on all fours and went for Overbeek in a most workmanlike manner.

The poor madman had now started down the hill in a series of rabbit leaps. Buddy hadn't time to laugh. It was one of your comedies in which death plays the comic rôle. The bear was gaining. Overbeek developed a bird-like genius, leaped to an overhanging branch and would have pulled himself to safety had not the bear anchored a long claw in the heel of one dainty hunting boot.

In the flash of a gun Buddy had chosen between two duties. He had scarcely pulled the trigger and seen the bear fall all of a heap when he was sorry he had done it. At the same moment Overbeek came unfastened from his branch and tumbled out of harm's way.

"You've saved my life," snarled the international one, pulling at a leather flask.

"Yes," admitted Buddy dully; "and I've killed Romeo."

"Romeo?" queried Overbeek, smacking his green lips.

"The pet bear of Axe Creek. The camp's mascot." He had all but burst into tears. "Poor old Romey!"

"Do you mean to tell me I've been running away from a tame bear?" gasped the gilded tenderfoot.

"Tame till he saw you, Terry. He was so tame that Gowan's cat used to scare him out of the store."

"Well, if he was so remarkably tame what did he come after me for?"

"Sugar," replied the gentle courier.

"Sugar!"

Overbeek groaned and sank down on Romeo's delicious log.

"The boys round the store taught him that trick—stand on his hind legs, turn round twice and open up his mouth for sugar."

Buddy sat beside Terry and regarded the corpse.

"He asked for sugar and you gave him hell."

"Look here," the adventuring millionaire said softly at last, "this mustn't get about, you know. They'd make no end of an ass of me if it should get out."

He was offering a large yellow bank note.

"Put it back!" gloomed Buddy.

"But you saved my life," persisted Overbeek. It was almost like an accusation.

"I can't help that now. I'm not shooting my friends by the job. Don't be afraid of my telling—I'd no more tell Axe Creek about this business than about a horse theft. Lynching never goes quite out of style in these nervous climates."

"You mean to say they'd take it—violently?"

"Well," drawled Buddy, "Romeo was a dear-loved brother."

"I think I'd better go back and break camp."

The stranger looked nervously along the trail whence they had come as Buddy sought an old prospect hole and borrowed a rusty crowbar. When he got back he found that Overbeek, his trophy lust conquering fear, had skinned poor Romeo. The corpse lay stark naked among the pine needles, the pelt was stretched over a bended sapling. Together they dug a grave with a crowbar and a tin dipper, and at sunset, when the funeral was over, they started back to Axe Creek.

And to-night, lying wakeful in bed, golden visions of to-morrow shimmering behind his eyeballs, Buddy could not withhold a chuckle at remembrance of the scene, three years back, when Overbeek's wagon show took its starlit departure. There had been a folding of many portable camping conveniences, a clattering of harness, a striking of tents.

And just before dawn, as the sleepy caravan was about to move away, Overbeek had leaned down from the boss wagon and repeated:

"You saved my life."

"You can forget that," Buddy had permitted.

"Remembering is my vice," the international sportsman had reminded him with an unexpected dignity. "And there's one thing I want you to do if you won't take money: If you ever come to New York and want a favour done I wish you'd ask it of me—will you?"

"Sure!"

Thus lightly Buddy McNair had gotten rid of a potential benefactor by starlight three years ago.

And to-night he turned his hot pillow over and made calculations upon the face of that promise. He was going to New York. What favour could he ask of Terry Overbeek? The Buddy McNair of yesterday was full of



wants. The Buddy McNair of to-day, successful beyond his hopes, already famous in the Rocky Mountain States, need not knock at the Overbeek's big front door for any ordinary boon.

And the picture of the lady in the star smiled out at him through the dark. He wished morning would come. Then a milky haze fell on his reflections. . . . "And I met up with a dame—" Shaggy's whining note buzzed mosquitolike in his ear. Poor old Doc! Why did he bet that five hundred, which he couldn't afford to lose? And less than three hours to Denver.

At last he slept.

II

THE train had been just nine minutes out of Colorado Springs when, in Pullman section Number Seven, across the aisle, a skirt stirred menacingly and a lady's plain grey cloak was thrown over the back of a seat. Buddy cast a glance of superstitious awe, but a bolder gaze gave him heart. She was no siren, certainly. She was short, wispy, faded, well beyond the age of lure and, Buddy thought, somewhat pathetic. She was struggling with a large travelling bag with which she was executing a most peculiar manœuvre. Apparently, in trying to drag it cross lots over the velvet back of the next section she had managed to get the bag over her shoulders; the train had swung round a complex curve at a delicate moment and, clutching wildly at the suitcase, she had jammed it at arm's length against the side of the car and now stood supporting it in the attitude of a plain and elderly caryatid.

"Can't I help you?" suggested Buddy McNair, chivalrously leaping to her aid. He got the bag into his masterful clutch, rejoicing in his superior prowess.

Being a shade under medium height he was little better equipped than she for tasks requiring the conquest of bulky loads at great heights, but in the willingness of the spirit he clutched the bag manfully overhead—and the train gave another lurch.

The bag jarred open, open wide, and the attraction of gravitation did its work in a businesslike manner. It was also fantastic. First a wire-bristled hairbrush dented the

crown of Buddy's new hat and flew off at a tangent; followed quickly then a cologne bottle, and as a chaser a box of talcum powder which had broken its bonds of baby-blue ribbon and made the world—notably Buddy's bright-blue suit—its own.

Helpless, indignant, humiliated, he stood there, his eyes protectively closed, blowing the powder from his upper lip like some queer whiffling bird, while the shower of woman's possessions swept over his modish form.

At last he blinked his vision free. The furious face of the lady he had sought to succour greeted him. Round him lay the havoc of his gallantry. Pins, pins, hairpins, hatpins, safety pins, pins in paper, cubes, cushions, played leapfrog with a manicure set, a toothbrush, a religious magazine and many stockings rolled into tight black sausages; then a loose-stirring company of white garments, terrifying, unmistakable.

Titters came to him above the roar of the train.

He stopped to start the inevitable and shameful work of restoration, when his head hit something hard. There was a cry, which Buddy will always believe was an oath, and a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles fell at his feet.

Simultaneously they stood erect.

Ladies weren't his strong point, bitterly he reflected, yet he restored the glasses with something very near to tenderness. She was not gracious, but that mattered little, for Buddy was again down on all fours, harvesting the wreckage. He had shyly garnered the hairbrush, the cologne bottle, two oranges and a red slipper when, looking up, he beheld the thing he feared.

A young lady had joined the group and was harvesting busily. She was pretty, under twenty-four, the corner of Buddy's eyes decided; and there were dimples fur above her plain dark gown. Under

were straight and smoothly spread like little wings, and her eyes were so deeply blue that he had thought them black at first. She had a lively little face, rather olive as to complexion, and her cheeks glowed wholesomely with a red that tinted on the apricot. As the kneeling knight offered his collection she looked him straight in the eye and laughed aloud.

"Oh, you do look funny!" she giggled.

"Do I?" asked Buddy with rather overdone dignity.

"He would be puttin' up me bag for me. I knew he couldn't reach, but he would," the doleful spinster moaned.

"It ought to teach you to ring for the porter," the violet eyes chided the spinster, trying ever so hard to look severe, "and to keep your bag closed."

Ring for the porter! Why hadn't poor Buddy thought of that? He coloured furiously. The porter wouldn't have spilled it; he was a specialist in hand bags. When would Buddy learn to get himself waited on?

Confusedly he knelt, proffering a tiny pink package of hairpins, which he had fished from under a seat.

"I think this is all," he said, wishing he had shipped himself by express.

"Thank you ever so much," acknowledged the generous mouth, giving him such a smile as angels make. "Please, won't you let Cora brush you off? It's only fair, you know."

"Thank you," said Buddy, noting Cora's hateful glare through her spectacles, "I'll ring for the porter."

Which he did.

When he returned to his section his new acquaintances seemed to have settled back into their antebellum calm; and in this he had no place. The pretty girl was completely absorbed in her magazine, and across from her the

grim Cora sat reading a red-bound volume entitled, in large gold letters, *Beauties of the Court of Louis XIV.*

Buddy sat dreading the dining car and peeped now and then around the day's edition of the Axe Creek Republican. Sitting serenely now beside the scrawny spinster lady he saw his friend the suitcase, its two straps securely buckled, its lock snapped tight. The young lady had taken her hat off, and he was fascinated by the texture of her wavy brown hair. Once he caught her taking him in rather curiously, but her glance scurried like a frightened mouse back to Section Seven again to hide between the covers of her magazine. Buddy wondered why her own attractive little hand bag still reposed upon the floor.

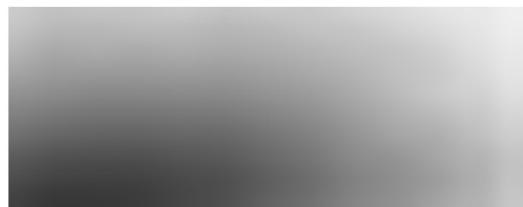
When the white-aproned Afric proclaimed a last call Buddy took courage and lurched toward the diming car. He had shuffled his wallet from his overcoat into an inside pocket of his blue suit and the burden gave him a stuffed feeling as though he were carrying a bale of hay. The steward found him a small table near a window, where Buddy gasped in the Pullman heat, his one earthly desire being to remove his coat and collar. He was a little homesick, and finding with alarm that his normal appetite had deserted him he limited his order to corned-beef hash, candied sweet potatoes, succotash, cauliflower *au gratin* and pie *à la mode*.

Four prosperously dressed strangers sat at the table across the aisle; well-to-do Eastern business men apparently. The fat one, by his own loud-voiced confession, was looking after shipbuilding contracts for the Union Iron Works. The tall, sallow gentleman with the nervous hands had been inspecting timberlands. The two smallish youngish blondish youths were sportsmen at large, for they talked wisely of polo at Coronado Beach.

Their conversation so fascinated the new-made cyanide



**AS THE KNEELING KNIGHT OFFERED HIS COLLECTION
SHE LOOKED HIM STRAIGHT IN THE EYE. "OH,
YOU DO LOOK FUNNY!" SHE GIGGLED.**



king that he was oblivious of all else until the girl with the wavy hair swam into his ken and took the place, less than a yard away from him, across the little table.

Buddy McNair, quite unaccustomed to eating with ladies, was undecided as to what was expected of him, whether he should engage her in light conversation or pretend he didn't know she was there. Her face, when he looked her way, was partly hidden behind the paddlelike menu card which she was holding daintily, much as Venus might have handled her looking-glass.

Buddy unfolded the Axe Creek Republican and continued reading a front-page article about himself. He wondered if there were any rules and regulations. How he wished Doc Naylor had come along! Then the monotonous chant of that toothless prophet, Shaggy Keenan, rang in his ears like a chapter out of Revelation:

"And I lit out for Denver. And I almost got there. And I met up with a dame."

He saw her place her written order where it was visible to the waiter.

"That's 'for two lamb chops—rather well done,'" he heard her pretty, educated voice. "And a pot of Ceylon tea. Will you see to it?"

Buddy's eyes again ventured forth. This time she was looking over at the party of four across the aisle. If he had thought her an angel at first glance he must now reverse his opinion, for the look she gave the merry party was undoubtedly disagreeable. Her eyes had changed from violet to steel black. Then she fumbled with her napkin and gazed out of the window; as the train was running round a ledge of rock there was obviously nothing to see.

"Would you care to read the news?" asked Buddy with an effort, holding out the Axe Creek Republican.

"Oh, thank you! You're very kind."

Her cheeks were peachy with a faint blush, and again she gave him her angel smile. She opened the sheet before her and fell into an absorbed inspection of Fraternal Notes on an inside page. Frail vanity prompted him to hope that she would choose Page One with its three-column headline beginning "Gilbert K. McNair, Our Celebrated Cyanide Magnate, Departs for Eastern Activities."

Presently her chops came in, and Buddy marvelling at her bird-size luncheon was fain to linger. A cup of tea and two chops! Who could keep alive on that? After paying his check he cudgelled his brain for an excuse to buy her something really filling. Ingenuity failed, so he took his hat from the peg.

"You've forgotten your paper."

She offered the Republican ever so sweetly.

"Thank you. Thank you ever so much."

He had an awful feeling as he swayed toward the smoking car that he should have insisted upon her keeping the paper; there didn't seem to be any rules with these women.

Through the tobacco-laden atmosphere of the club smoker he saw the four prosperous travellers perched all in a row like birds of passage. He had scarcely chosen a slippery leather chair for himself when the blond polo anecdoticist from Coronado Beach detached himself from his row and came sauntering over. In his bluish-grey suit, as he stood gracefully over Buddy, he looked ever so much like a fine Maltese cat.

"I beg your pardon. Is this Mr. McNair?"

"You've got me," responded the surprised one.

"My name's Stevenson."

Buddy found himself shaking a signet-ringed hand as the Maltese cat settled himself, purring, into the next chair.

"I was told at Colorado Springs that you would be on this train. Sir Angus Ironyne, the Scotch cyanide man, asked me to look you up."

"Friend of yours?" asked Buddy, immediately interested.

"Opened the polo season with him. Splendid chap—beastly seat, though."

"Kind of him to remember me." Buddy's relations with the mighty Scot had consisted of one short business wrangle.

"I've been a bit interested in mining myself." Mr. Stevenson cast a patronising glance at the passing Rockies.

"Quite a lot of it left," Buddy suggested.

"Going on to New York?"

"That's my opinion."

"Bully! We're going right on too. Perhaps we'll——"

Mr. Stevenson's three companions, passing single file toward the rear, distracted his attention.

"Not starting already?" he called out waggishly, whereat the fat one stopped at the door, smiled bulbously and wheezed:

"Got to start sometime. Got only a couple of hours."

"That's Planchoff Hull. You know—vice president of the Union Iron Works," volunteered Mr. Stevenson. "Splendid old chap—best there is. His one vice is gambling."

"Bad habit," grunted Buddy. Several of the gold eagles he had dumped into his pocket pressed uncomfortably as he sat down upon them.

"Aren't you in the Altazona, third car to the rear?" Stevenson had arisen and was presenting his cordial palm.

"That's my present address."

"Good. We've got a stateroom at the end. I hope you'll

consider it your headquarters. And if you happen to want a little——”

Stevenson winked and his right hand raised a phantom flask, pantomimically pouring.

“Thank you kindly. I shouldn’t be surprised if I did,” was Buddy’s promise that sped the stranger toward his bounteous stateroom.

He sat a while in thought, smoking his cigar down to the point where it singed the band. Now and again he raised a nervous hand and patted the fat wallet which so frankly bulged his side. He rather wished he had left it in Doc’s care, as suggested. Less than an hour out and here were fashionable strangers clamouring for poker. The odds were in favour of their being just what they claimed to be, in which case he might very well sit in and pass away an otherwise heavy afternoon. A rich man can afford to pay for his pleasures, even if they are follies, he reflected easily.

At last he unlimbered his cramped legs and strolled toward the rear. The door of the stateroom stood generously open as he passed into the Altazoona. The dark lumber magnate was dealing out poker hands. A porter was filling long glasses with ice.

Manhood conquered and Buddy got to Section Eight, where he clumped wearily down and diverted his mind with scraps of glowing biography from the front page of the Axe Creek Republican. The girl with the wavy hair never looked across the aisle. He kept hoping she would. She was knitting at a little mop of yarn, and as she drove the needles back and forth between her slender fingers the skinny person in the opposite seat continued to glare into the scandals of poor Louis’ court. Even such glowing phrases as “Gilbert Kernochan McNair, the Wizard of Cyanide” or “He came a poor boy among us and arose, by

dint of sterling worth, to wealth and affluence" from the first page of the Axe Creek Republican failed to rouse his soggy spirit. Altogether it sounded as though he had died and the obituary editor had gotten at him. Still the pretty girl across the way kept her eyes upon her knitting. Anyhow, he was glad she didn't like the scenery.

Buddy took the oppressive wallet out of his coat and slipped it into his overcoat.

Presently the dapper Mr. Stevenson came sauntering again into view. He seemed in no hurry—stopped once or twice to look out of the window. At last he leaned on the back of Buddy's seat and smiled most invitingly.

"We're getting a nice little game started and wondered if you wouldn't come in and make it five," he suggested.

"Thank you," said Buddy, stirring nervously, "I don't care if I do."

"Well, then——"

Suggestively the Maltese cat stood in the aisle, glancing brightly toward the stateroom and more brightly back at Buddy.

Buddy thought at once of his unguarded wallet and a last ounce of caution asserted itself.

"I've got to fix some things in my suitcase," he temporised. "You go back and I'll join you."

"We'll all be glad to have you," the elegant Mr. Stevenson assured him as he turned down the car.

Buddy stood in the aisle, his overcoat on his arm. He had about decided to take that money-bearing garment along with him and sit on it during the game; then it occurred to him that he could never be safe with so much cash within reach and a jack pot on the table. The crowd in the stateroom were all right, probably. . . .

"I beg your pardon!"

It was a clear and very pleasant note, obviously address-

ing him, and looking round he saw the girl with the wavy hair smiling up quite adorably.

"Excuse me," faltered Buddy. "Did you speak?"

"There's something I've been crazy to ask you; I hope you won't think me silly."

Her eyes were blue-black in the intensity of her appeal, yet she was smiling.

"If the answer's in me it's yours," he assured her, taking courage as he denuded himself of his new hat.

Where were Doc Naylor's precautions now? She had sidled along, making a place for him, pushing the small travelling bag along with her foot. He threw himself into the space beside her, mauling his overcoat across his lap.

"I thought," she began, looking modestly up from her knitting, "that you were from one of the mining camps. The paper you were kind enough to lend me——"

Whatever she had to ask seemed difficult to formulate into words. Buddy's subconscious mind warned him that possibly she was fumbling for questions.

"Axe Creek's my town," he assisted her. "A little less than two hours on the branch from Colorado Springs."

"Oh, then you are from a mining camp! Please don't say you aren't!"

Her look was piteous.

"I guess you can call it that. The altitude and the mines are still there."

"I'm a dreadful tenderfoot," she went rippling along with alarming affability. "I've been only to Colorado Springs; and that's nothing more than a tourist place. I've been mad to get into the wilds and see something."

"Of course there isn't much to see in winter—nothing but snow."

"Yes. And I've had a great deal to do this winter;

hardly a moment that I could call my own. And now I'm going away as ignorant as I came."

She was so girlishly innocent that Buddy, made alert, gave her a moment's scrutiny. He remembered that hard understanding look which had passed from her to the man at the opposite table. What had he here? He was battling with a soft intoxication; the pleasantly trapped feeling that a rabbit must enjoy when he has been snared by some particularly delightful bait. Most certainly he had met up with a dame!

"Axe Creek's a good little camp," Buddy conceded. "Of course if you're looking for Bret Harte you'll find more of him in the Boston Public Library."

"Oh, don't tell me that!" she almost wept.

"We got rid of smallpox and bad men about 1885. But I hate to hurt your feelings," he grinned.

"Isn't there something that's different about it?"

"Oh, it's all different—from what it was. Last year we put two miles of asphalt on Arapahoe Avenue, and the Acme National Bank building is the best four-story concrete structure west of—"

"You might as well be talking about New Rochelle."

She laid down her knitting. The scrawny lady on the opposite seat glared round the corner of old Louis' naughty court.

"But of course you don't do everything in that poky way," she told him, studying his features with a care that flattered him beyond words. "You must have some sombreros and flying lariats and gun play up and down your main street."

"Lots of it," he grinned, and was glad that she had stopped his career of disillusionment.

"Thank heaven! Tell me about it."

"We have two moving-picture theatres."

"Oh!"

"They're very popular with the boys round the camp. Cowboy scenes and holdups are the favourites. We've even learned a lot of rough words, like *pronto* and *hombre*, off the captions. The only people who ever give the sheriff any trouble are the boys who think the movies are real and try to shoot up the town. But life would be pretty slow sometimes without the pictures."

"I wonder if you're teasing me," she pouted.

This gave Buddy McNair a tremendous heart thump. She made him feel so ridiculously attractive and important. It seemed a pity, though, that she should think he had been teasing her; it was not her fault that she had had to work so hard that she had never seen the West. It was pathetic, rather, that any grown person should be so ignorant.

"I wish I had a chance really to show you," he volunteered. "There are lots of mines up there, and lots of deer. But everything's protected by the game laws or got a fence round it."

"Oh, if you could show me!" The slim ringless hands came together and she looked at him with such appeal that caution fled and he had a whim to carry her to the mountains on a flying horse.

Instead he began in his nearest possible approach to a pedagogic delivery:

"You see, mining camps change about as fast as everything else, I guess. If we drill rock and run our ore cars by electricity it's natural that our streets should be electric lighted.

"We'll always use a good deal of pine for building, because we're in the timber belt; but when we want to put on style and keep warm we send down below for a load of bricks and cement. Most everybody in camp keeps a flivver and runs it when the roads are open."

"Of course you've no train robbers?"

"Don't need 'em. Eastern syndicates do our robbery for us."

"But how can you keep from committing an act of violence now and then if you're always carrying a revolver?"

"I don't think I'd know how to shoot one if I had it," was Buddy's discouraging reply.

Either this young lady was very green or she was stringing him, he concluded, and was immediately ashamed of himself for attributing so much as a knowledge of deceit to those most innocent of eyes.

"How do you make a living? Don't say you are a grocer or a conductor on a trolley car."

"Cyanide of potassium," he informed her with dramatic brevity.

"Hurrah! That sounds violent. Cyanide is a deadly drug, isn't it?"

"The rankest poison there is," he cheerfully agreed. "Once I saw a Polak labourer opening a can. He got a little crystal the size of an ant's eyeball mixed up in his whiskers."

"It didn't kill him!" She was leaning forward, excited as a child at a bedtime story.

"I didn't think much of it at the time, because a Polak uses his whiskers the way a lady uses her hand bag—to tote yarn, small change, samples, love letters, candy; and I thought that Polak was just taking some of it home to his wife, but all of a sudden he lets out a yell like——"

The simile of the Polak's yell was interrupted by the affable Mr. Stevenson, who had come up the aisle and laid a friendly hand on Buddy's shoulder.

"If you'll pardon me," he apologised, "they're waiting the game for you."

"I'll be right down," sang out Buddy.

The blue-grey suit went down the aisle; but when Buddy again looked at the girl he found eyes that were sad with disapproval.

"And just in the midst of that wonderful story!"

It was rapture to have a woman's eyes woo you so, her lips so mutely plead.

"I'll just sit in for a round o' jacks and come back and—"

She laughed. It was very pretty and horribly irritating. Down the aisle he could see the blue-grey suit lingering.

"I'm not so crazy about gambling anyhow," he further weakened.

"We'll soon be in Denver," she pointed out.

"I'll call off the darned game," he promised her, and caught up with Mr. Stevenson a few yards away from the stateroom door.

"Say, friend," began Buddy, "I don't think I'll play. Just as much obliged. I've got a sort of headache and—"

"Oh, come along!" Stevenson glanced smilingly toward the girl in Section Seven. "That sort of thing won't cure a headache, you know."

"You'll leave that to me, please."

He could feel his neck swelling inside his new collar, and the blond face, an inch removed from Buddy's sharp nose, grew a shade lighter.

Buddy found her fussing with her small travelling bag when he came back. It was rather a nice-looking bag of walrus leather and on the end were the initials M. H. H. in gilt letters.

"I bet I can hoist that one without spilling it," Buddy volunteered cheerfully, reaching for the small bag.

"No, no! Not this one!" She pulled it away from him almost rudely.

And when he had resumed his seat beside her she urged
"Now tell me—what did the Polak let out a yell like?"

"Like a widowed wild cat," Buddy took up the tale.
"Turned a double back stem-winder into a hundred-ton vat.
And next Wednesday when they sluiced out the tailings
what do you think they found?"

Blue Eyes couldn't guess; and when the Polak's last
appearance was common property and had reminded Buddy
of innumerable thrilling anecdotes touching upon the man-
ners of Axe Creek the train was winding its way far down
into the foothills.

III

THEY stopped at a small settlement amidst a maze of tracks.

"They're unhooking the diner," announced the skinny lady, who had gone out to look and had come back shivering with the upland cold. "They're going to couple it on with another train going west."

"Don't you think it would be jolly to take a breath on the platform?" asked the girl with the wavy hair.

Any breath with her would be jolly, he knew. He had become utterly absorbed in the dame he had so thoroughly met up with. Perhaps she had taken up with him, rather, but Buddy was beyond caring. He hoped she'd change cars with him at Denver and be in his train all the way East; but he hadn't considered it delicate to ask her yet. Perhaps before Denver. . . .

"Better put on your hat," he suggested in a tone to him thrillingly protective. "Turns pretty sharp this time of year."

"Do you think we'll have time?" she anxiously inquired, lifting her graceful elbows to arrange the little hat with the patch of fur.

"They'll play drop the handkerchief for at least ten minutes," he informed her, like the experienced traveller he wasn't.

It was a delight to help her on with her coat; and being cursed with an imagination that could bound unhindered from hypothesis to conclusion, he saw himself renouncing his ambitions for the big world to take care of some poor

girl like this one; to support her in luxury, buying finer and finer clothes for her as the years went on. By the time they had stepped down to the platform he had very definitely pictured to himself the wedding and the sort of house they would choose to live in. Which, he came to know later, was the sort of house no sane person would ever choose to live in. He noticed that she was carrying the small walrus bag.

"Let me:—" Again he would have taken it, and again she gently retained it.

"You aren't going to change cars or anything?" he asked, afraid that he would lose her after all.

"Oh, no. It's just that I've a habit of carrying this little bag myself. Isn't the air delightful?"

The scrawny woman, wearing her plain gray cloak, followed grimly in the rear as they joined the feverish procession of leg-stretching tourists, marching and counter-marching along the narrow strip of boards. Across the platform the west-going train, a chain of Pullmans as nearly like their east-going rivals as cars could be, had rolled in and stood puffing and whirling at every air brake. Buddy and his companion were silent for the first few rounds of the station as they walked rapidly, breathing in deep lungfuls of mountain air. Buddy noted that the young woman at his side was half a hand taller than he. He stood very straight, made every vertebra do its duty, but still when he wanted to meet her eyes he found he must look up. He wondered if she despised his inferior stature.

Presently he saw the four poker players from the state-room get off, followed by a baggage-laden porter. They were crossing over toward the western train; and as the affable blond had told him they were going all the way to New York it became quite evident to him that the friendly strangers were what he had half suspected—professional

gamblers. He hoped the girl with the wavy hair hadn't seen; and then he realised that even if she had she would never understand. She stood looking into the declining sun, apparently oblivious of all that was about her.

She started walking again.

"I wonder who the high priest is," she laughed, "who christens Pullman cars?"

It became a pleasant sport with them, remarking on the names adorning the items of the two trains standing on either side of the little platform, pulling out, uncoupling, recoupling, jarring, ringing bells. The car on which they had made their home for the afternoon was called the Altazoona; there was one across the way called Alazama. There was a Zulu, a Rhomboidia and an Otomoto.

"Maybe they take the encyclopedia from Ab to Zex," he suggested, "and shake it all together and add a little bay rum."

"I know," she trilled. "They do it by numerology. Haven't you heard of the science of numbers?"

Buddy confessed his ignorance.

"Every one is born with a number—just the way houses and telephones are, I suppose. Somehow your number gets twisted up with the signs of the zodiac. And if you're unlucky—as you usually are—you've got to change your name. I've got an aunt who insists that my cryptic name is Plowa."

"And you let her?"

"How can I help myself?"

"It strikes me that you're a young lady who wouldn't stand for a lot of monkey business. For instance, look at the way you hang on to that grip."

Her expression darkened a shade.

"I—I wasn't trying to hold you up," he reminded her, "You know what I said about toting a gun."

"I—I'll explain all about this bag—before we get to Denver," she said contritely, as though she owed something to him.

Buddy laughed.

"Bless your heart," he said, and could have bitten his tongue out at the familiarity, "I'll bet it's some woman reason!"

"I don't believe you know much about us," she said, her eyes brightening.

Buddy grinned and held his peace for another length of the platform. Detached Pullman cars, propelled as by magic, were bumping over the switches and crashing together amid a loud wheezing of the air brakes. Several passengers were clustered round a dingy news stand, buying home papers.

"I had a chance to study one of you," he volunteered at last. "I don't know if she was a fair sample, but I guess she was."

"And how much did you learn?" She glanced archly from under the little hat.

"How much I didn't know."

"That's the same as saying all women are alike. It's the stupid cry of bitterness. It's just as if you said that all oysters were the same because you'd been poisoned by a bad one."

"I didn't say she was a fair sample."

"In what way did she vary from the type?" She managed to ask this without looking like a school-teacher.

"She was a Swedish song-and-dance artist from the Pansy Varieties."

"Oh, I wish you would tell me!"

"Maybe sometime——"

He could feel himself blushing. The west-bound train

was made up now, and stood quietly, the porters in place beside their wooden footstools.

"Oh, there's the New York Times!" cried she, a look of joyous recognition sweeping the news stand.

"I'll get one for you." Buddy was more than pleased to be buying even so light a thing for her convenience. Also he was a trifle relieved to be able to withdraw gracefully from the Pansy Varieties.

The girl, followed by her gloomy attendant, continued to pace the platform. The man at the news stand wasn't sure but that he could find a later copy. Somewhere a trainman sang out "All aboard!"

Buddy McNair looked up, to behold a most confusing spectacle. The Western train was already pulling out; and in the glass-partitioned vestibule of the last car, the Alazama, stood the girl with the wavy hair, shouting something he could not hear and flourishing her hand bag, the morose Cora standing gaunt at her elbow.

"You're on the wrong train!" shouted Buddy, just in time to realise that his warning was ridiculously too late. The porters had closed the hatches and the Alazama was gliding smoothly away into the sunset.

Buddy McNair had no opportunity to reflect at length on ways and means of rescue, for trainmen were now calling "All aboard!" on the other side of the platform. He stood gaping as long as safety would permit and swung to the handrail of the Altazoona at the last practical moment. He threw himself into his seat in Section Eight and gave his mind over to conscience-stricken thoughts. He had been the lady's protector, responsible for the time for her safety—and he had let her make that wild mistake. Right under his nose she had gotten on the wrong train.

Not only that but she was now going West in company with that quartet of card sharps and, at the thought of

the unexplained car change all round, a suspicion no larger than a girlish glove rose on his mental horizon, spread and muddied his soul. Possibly she had good reasons for boarding the other train. Possibly—

He dived down into the inside pocket of his new overcoat. His wallet was gone.

He patted his new suit and got nothing but the jingle of gold pieces. He crossed over to Section Seven, where his overcoat had lain unguarded beside the glibly talking girl during the time it had taken him to follow the blond sharper down the aisle. After assuring himself that the other passengers were not looking that way he stooped and felt under the seat in a quick hope that the thing had dropped out of his pocket.

He sat back at last and enjoyed a great calm. Of course he could notify the conductor and start the telegraph wires humming to head off the runaway gang. This was obviously his public duty. But it would make the news public, and he could see a quaint article featured in to-morrow's Axe Creek Sentinel, whose business it was to be unfriendly to the Supercyanide. It wouldn't be fair to his backers for such a story to get abroad. No. And the boys in camp mustn't know.

He glanced over at the seat so recently occupied by the spinster lady and saw the double strapped and locked bag which the gaunt person had left behind in her flight. Houdini himself could not have opened that and hidden a wallet in the time it had taken the girl to whisk away his money.

As they were steaming into the suburbs of Denver the conductor stopped and asked, "Ladies left behind?"

"Got the wrong car, I guess," said Buddy with an indifference he was beginning to feel. Then he sat back and laughed; and his laughter made him angry, because it was

the way he had behaved when the little Swede ran away with the travelling salesman.

"And I lit out for Denver. And I almost got there. And I met up with a dame——"

At the station he saw the porter carrying Cora's bag of his undoing toward the lost-and-found department.

Buddy asked a cab driver the name of the best hotel in Denver, and drove there to spend the two hours before he caught the limited. Here he signed a check and scribbled off a note to Doc Naylor:

"Dear Doc: Inclosed my check for five hundred dollars. You win. If you tell any of the boys I'll kill you. Everything going fine. BUDDY."

IV

THE reasons why Buddy McNair's first dinner in New York was at the apartment of Mr. Pontius Blint were reasons as simple and direct as any which governed his life: Mr. Blint asked him and Buddy went. And here possibly lies the key to Buddy's misadventures in the metropolis—his method was always illogically direct; New York's was logically devious.

He had registered at the Hotel Merlinbilt because a well-dressed stranger on the train from Chicago had mentioned it as a fashionable place to live in. He had taken a suite which comprised a drawing-room, bedroom and private foyer—all daintily white-panelled and trimmed with Empire brass—because the Second Assistant Secretary of State, in the capacity of clerk, had intimated that a suite would be far more expensive than a room and bath. So far his moves had been fashionably right.

It was getting on toward dusk when Buddy, having richly pensioned the bell boy, found himself alone with his new splendour. The furniture was of a pistachio-green enamel, the rug Chinese blue. Over the ivory mantel hung the portrait of a dim mediæval gentleman, lithographed after Rembrandt so ingeniously as to all but catch him. Buddy was already beginning to enjoy that desolate feeling peculiar to lone pleasure seekers in the metropolis when he spied a telephone cuddled close to its attendant book on the pistachio-green desk. Doc Naylor had suggested that Blint's connection with the firm that had bought Supercyanide gave Buddy a claim on his time which would justify a

Once in an illustrated book on Egyptology Buddy had seen a picture which had stuck to his memory. It had represented several dog-faced, eagle-beaked deities of the Nile sitting cozily together, while above them all, arching over them in the attitude of one who exercises to reduce abdominal *embonpoint*, the tallest, thinnest sky-blue lady in all the pantheon had stood touching her fingers to earth. She was the goddess who undertook to supervise all human destinies, and the Egyptians very fittingly called her Nut.

"The Temple of Nut!" said Buddy McNair, looking upward to the labyrinth of light. Somewhere up there the Blints were giving their home dinner.

A black giant in a Nile-green uniform, a wonderful golden pill box adhering mysteriously to his wool, put forth a white-gloved hand and opened a city gate of glass and ornamental bronze.

"Good evening," ventured Buddy, confused before the presence.

"Wish to see?" replied the black commander, rolling disapproving eyeballs.

"I was looking for Mr. Blint, but I guess I got the wrong number," said Buddy.

The black warrior was immensely tall; and Buddy, who was a smallish man, stood dwarfed in this combined throne room of Thor, Isis and Belshazzar.

"Announce self, please!" ordered the genie of the threshold, shooting out his immense white glove in a gesture of pointing.

Over an acre of Turkish carpet Buddy could see a small door of some fabulous curly wood slide noiselessly open, and to him was revealed a mirror-lined cage, silhouetting such another figure as stood at the door. This, he took it, was an elevator operating between earth and those dwellers of the upper air who, like Nut, blue-bellied god-

dess of Egypt, touch ground only with the tips of their fingers and toes. Buddy McNair's tan shoes, which had hurt him across the continent, took him painfully through the echoing hall as far as the elevator. For the first time Buddy noticed that they squeaked.

"Announce self, please!" ordered the sentinel in the elevator, pointing his white glove at another angle.

Behind a forest of marble pillars Buddy recognised a telephone switchboard, before which a freckled West Indian, bathed in the glare of a hanging lamp, glowered up at him and inquired in the voice of the negroid Swede:

"Who calling, pleez?"

"Gilbert K. McNair, of Axe Creek, Colorado."

"Who calling, pleez?"

"Gilbert Kernochan McNair, of Axe Creek, Colorado. I've got two letters and a telegram to prove it, and if that don't go you can look at the initials in my hat."

"What's the name?"

"Mack Nair."

"Wish to see?"

"Mr. Blint."

The operator made spiteful clickings and thrust the heads of mechanical serpents into mysterious holes.

"Mr. Narro calling!" he whined into the vast; and all the time he kept his yellowish eyes glued upon the details of Buddy's costume. The stare caused Buddy to fidget, to flea imaginary particles of dust from the collar of his new blue suit, the Fashion's pride. He was about to ask the freckled mentor for a candid statement of the case, when one of the mechanical serpents slipped back into its hole and the West Indian chanted:

"Aw ri'. 'Leven flo' fron'."

The elevator, into which he was now admitted, was equipped with mirrors for his special undoing, he imagined.

It was an interesting study in light refraction, for there were mirrors at the four sides and little ones set diagonally at the corners, so that the dazzled passenger in the progress upward could count fourteen Buddy McNairs standing in company front, each Buddy costumed like the others, in a flaming blue suit and necktie of a dainty robin's-egg hue.

There was something about the general appearance of the Buddys that he didn't like. Their sleeves fell farther over their hands than seemed to be vogue among the smart-walking fellows he had seen in the lobby of the Merlinbilt. He wondered if the Buddys didn't need a different kind of hair cut. One strand of sunburnt brown hair was standing up in the back like a comedy aigret, and the row of Buddys stroked it, all in unison, in a gesture resembling a back-action salute. They weren't bad-looking fellows, those blue-clad reflections—fine-featured, rather sensitive looking, merry-eyed—but they did need a hair cut!

"Second door right!"

The elevator, now in the upper regions sacred to Nut, opened upon a hotel hallway, punctuated by numerous identical mahogany doors. On the bare marble floor no nuance of his shoes' squeakings was lost; wishing almost that he had not come he pressed the little ivory button of the second door on the right, and then consoled himself with the recollection of Pontius Blint's cordiality. Probably his family were kinder than his sentinels.

A cold aristocrat in cap and apron opened and gestured him into a retiring room off a hallful of gold-framed landscapes. Everything seemed touched with gold here. There was gold on the bureau, which offered a golden toilet set under a gold framed mirror. A golden couch held a pile of fur lined overcoats and many silk hats. Buddy cast down his outer garments and stared uneasily round him. It had never occurred to him that the element in which he



**HER NAME WAS DORIS, AND SHE HAD EVIDENTLY
INHERITED HER EYEBROWS FROM HER MOTHER.**



had made his fortune could so oppress him. He was choking with the indigestion of Midas. At last gingerly fingering a golden brush he managed to lay the aigret at the back of his head. Then filled with the courage of despair he marched rapidly down the hall.

"Well, well, Mr. McNair—how do you do?"

Pontius Blint, his pear-shaped figure in the perfection of evening attire, came forward to wring his hand. Buddy gasped. Beyond in the drawing-room he could see other suits as formal, as perfect as Mr. Blint's. The quick appraisal that the piggish little eyes gave Buddy's blue suit was all but lost in the welcoming smile under the close-cropped grey moustache.

"Say, look here, I didn't know I was walking into a fireman's ball!"

Buddy could hear the cackle of much conversation and obliquely through the door caught the flash of silks and naked shoulders.

The strangest apparition of womanhood Buddy had ever seen pounced forward and made herself known as Mrs. Blint. She was popping out of a few artfully arranged yards of pink chiffon; and though her shoulders were redundantly luscious her head was withered to a wonderful mask. Her hair was red, like the wool on a dyed sheep-skin; violet-red spots showed through the powder on either cheek like roses under untimely snows.

But it was her eyebrows that held Buddy in hideous fascination. They were black as new baling wire, and as thinly drawn. They were peaked up into little metallic arches that almost touched her exotic hair. His first supposition was that the poor woman had been born without eyebrows and had pasted these curious circumflex accents on her forehead; but after he had looked at them as closely as he dared he decided that they were composed of hairs, genuine human

hairs with roots beneath the surface of her richly enamelled skin.

So absorbed was he in this phenomenon that he heard little of the chatter she was directing toward him, and it was not until a younger and more highly garnished edition of herself was brought forward that he came to.

"My daughter, Mr. McNair," the elder of the two apparitions was carefully smiling. Her name was Doris, he learned; and she had evidently inherited her eyebrows from her mother. Her face resembled a smartly decorated china egg, with a hank of glossy hair pulled back at the top, exaggerated lashes under those curious brows, and a splash of carmine for lips. Her gown, which was abundant from the waistline to the knees, was dripping with silvery lace. She took an affected pose, shrugging an expanse of lean shoulder; and it was obvious to Buddy that her shallow brown eyes were taking in the details of his blue suit.

"How do you do?" she challenged, sweeping him from the crown of his head to the toes of his yellow shoes.

And in those same shoes Buddy McNair was standing very unsteadily; he had a feeling that his new blue suit was falling away from him in tatters, for on every hand he beheld men of various ages, elaborately evening dressed, pleated as to shirt fronts, their broadcloth coats fitting sleek and glossy over their sides as though some tarry preparation had been poured on wooden models of the male form divine and then highly polished. A few of them wore velvet collars and deeply brocaded waistcoats, tinted off the white.

Miss Flint had been portioned off to entertain him, and the task was evidently even less to her liking than to his.

"Smoke?" she shrilled, offering him the box and taking one herself. She had just finished a cigarette and seemed nervously anxious to get at another. Buddy struck a match

and served her so clumsily that he all but singed away those exotic lashes.

"Have you danced at the new St. Vitus roof?"

Doris was chatting in the desperate manner of one compelled to entertain an idiot child. He accepted a cocktail in a silver glass, and reverting to his formula explained that he was a stranger in town. It was hard to perform all these small actions without moving his feet, but by a furious concentration and considerable muscular control he managed to sway from the waist, keeping his legs and feet immobile, and so silencing for a pregnant interval his chatty yellow boots.

"Oh, you must! They have an owfully heavenly jazz band. There's something so romantic about the Hawaiian music, don't you think? And they have the funniest man at the bass drum—owfully funny—pink and yellow lights in the drum. I'm taking solo dancing from Lothario; don't you think he has an owfully fascinating method?"

Buddy was wondering if he would be expected to say "owfully," when a man at the big white-and-gold doors announced dinner. He surged forward with the rest, walking with a stiff lifting step which seemed to modify the music of his shoes.

"It was only a few steps to the electric chair," he had once read in the account of some one's passing; he had the feeling that in any event he was in the power of his executioners. They shoved him into the presence of many etched goblets and golden plates. He took the chair which he was told to take and found himself facing a row of silver instruments laid out on the white cloth with a precision suggesting surgery. He recognised the useful domesticated knife and fork among the curiously tined and twisted strangers. But what of these little tridents, polite broad-

axes, silvery spears and stilettos—a confusing row of them on either side of his plate?

"We want you to be like a member of the family," Mrs. Blint had coyly whispered; and he was settled near the foot of the table between her and the amiable Doris. This was kind of her, he thought at first. But after a long sterile period he came to the conclusion that the Blints had put him there for the purpose of hedging him in and preventing his possible acquaintance with their other guests.

After a frightened inspection of the equipment round his plate he turned appealing eyes to Mrs. Blint on his right and Miss Blint on his left; but on either side he got but the cold corner of utterly unprotected shoulder blades. There must have been something in his cocktail; mixed drinks always tasted like Florida water to Buddy. Here he sat, a simple mountain crow caged among birds of paradise.

He reached stealthily for his napkin and was just dragging a corner toward him when one of those silver handled surgical instruments jabbed spitefully into the hem, bounced up and was lost under the table. Miss Blint wriggled and he became horribly conscious that the thing had fallen into her lap.

"Here it is," she simpered, restoring the odd tool. "Is it customary out West to throw knives at dinner parties?"

"I beg—I beg your pardon," he blushingly declared. "I'll be all right when I get the hang of this game."

"I merely wished to know what to expect," she giggled, and edged away toward the beautiful Mr. Hurler, who had been occupying her attention.

Two servants were now offering platters of curious baubles. Quite apparently it was something to eat, but just what it was, besides being very fancy, Buddy couldn't guess. Architecturally the baubles were of similar design

—a circular raft of toast supported a layer of yellow hash; topping this was a little rose carved from a beet, and coiled in its centre a small animal body, which to Buddy's uninitiated sense appeared to be a pickled worm. A manservant presented a platter at Mrs. Blint's elbow, and the lady with a curiously dexterous twist of her limber wrists got one of those rosy worm's nests between two silver instruments and lifted it over her left shoulder to her plate.

Was Buddy McNair expected to do that?

He sat there frozen with horror. It seemed but the briefest moment before a similar platter appeared at his own elbow, a maid servant leaning toward him like a cussed damosel. Never before had the man from Axe Creek been called to so cruel a test of nerve. With the feeling that eleven pairs of eyes were focused critically upon him he took careful survey of the fashionable food.

Across the silver edge of the dish lay a hermaphrodite fork and a similar spoon, handles pointing at him.

He devitalised his wrists and reached over his shoulder, striving to copy the Blint technic. With the tines of the spoon-fork he attempted to coerce one of the rose crowned elaborations on to the fork-spoon. It eluded his first attack and skidded halfway across the dish, where it lay cowering among its companions. His second assault upset it so that the pickled worm together with a spoonful of mysterious nourishment was spilled across the silvery surface. By using the fork-spoon as a shovel he got control of the rosebud at last, but the worm lay forever lost amid the wreckage of the raft.

"You got a very poor helping, Mr. McCall," he heard the solicitous voice of Mrs. Blint remarking.

"Never mind, mahmah," icily trilled Miss Blint, applying a napkin to her gown; "I got most of it."

"I guess it's the change of climate," said Buddy, attempt-

ing to cover his confusion. The beautiful Mr. Hurler was evidently saying something quite humorous, for Doris was giggling merrily.

"You find the change very severe, don't you?" asked Mrs. Blint, making a maddening effort to be kind.

"From nine thousand two hundred and twenty-six feet to sea level is a drop that has killed many a better man than me," he ventured to say.

"Tell me all about the West," she besought him; but Buddy had scarcely begun pointing out a few glories of mining-camp life when it was apparent by her set smile that she wished he had stayed among them.

"Doris," she smiled, talking across him, "you must listen to Mr. McNair's fascinating tales of the West."

She had gotten his name right at last. Buddy was appropriately flattered.

Doris abandoned her Mr. Hurler, and it was evident that she was furious at the interruption.

"Mahmah's crazy about guidebooks," she told him, giving him the benefit of her most perfect condescension. "I think they're owfully stupid, don't you?"

"Owfully," agreed Buddy. "I'll take you to the movies, if you'll go, and show you more about the West in an hour than I've learned in a lifetime."

She revealed no encouraging sign, so Buddy, with a cautious glance across the table, asked in a whisper: "Who's the chisel-faced boy in the Tuxedo—the one with the quinine mouth, talking to the lady in blue?"

"Sh-h-h," she cautioned; then with the air of one who has been asked by an Italian immigrant what the big statue with the spiked crown in New York Harbour is, she explained:

"That's Middleton Knox."

"You don't know him?"

"Can't say I do." He wanted to add that he hoped he never should.

"I thought not. He's related to everybody who is anybody in New York. He's the famous wit."

"I thought so," Buddy allowed himself to say. "I just heard him tell the lady in blue that she had a mind like an anteater."

"Middie is always insulting—especially to women," she informed him. "He's famous for that. He's dreadfully awful; he goes everywhere."

She had done her duty by him apparently, for she turned eagerly back to the overdone Apollo on her left.

Strangely enough at this instant Buddy gave a passing thought to the girl on the D. & R. G. With all her cunning and skilful duplicity she had managed to give the impression of genuine human sympathy. This Doris Blint impressed him as something enamelled to the heart. Actually she might be quite genuine, which would be no sadder paradox than the honest-seeming falsity of the girl on the D. & R. G.

A little later he got a shred of fish on his plate and a smear of sauce on his sleeve by means of the same loose-wristed spear-and-scrape-process. He gained courage with practice and began to feel a growing familiarity with the new art, though when ices were served he all but immersed his portion in a glassy bowl of water which had been placed before him on a golden plate. Doris Blint helped him out of this tangle, flipping a saucer and a doily with prestidigitorial grace; and he would have thanked her for the service save for the painted look she gave him.

Something she said to Mr. Hurler set that elegant person cackling.

"Oh, Doris, Doris! But that isn't the way I heard it,"

and lowering his voice he retailed his own accepted version. Mrs. Blint was then busily engaged with the stout gentleman at her right, and Buddy sat, a silent island in a sea of noise. The way Mr. Hurler had heard it was evidently an improvement, for Miss Blint shrilled again and again, her spare shoulders growing rosy in the exercise of mirth.

"Shall I tell Mr. McNair?" asked Miss Blint, suddenly conscious that Buddy was at the table.

"At your own risk," spluttered the Greek god.

"It's an owfully snappy thing about a drummer who got off at a strange town," began Miss Blint, employing a half whisper as her hard carmine lips came close to Buddy's ear. "Have you heard it?"

Buddy was sure he hadn't, though it reminded him of something Doc Naylor used to tell visiting miners out back of Jerry's corner.

Miss Blint at once launched forth in a highly spiced version of Doc Naylor's old favourite.

After the first episode she paused bashfully and insisted, "Stop me if you've heard it."

"Well," said Buddy, "I've heard it."

His tone must have implied more than his words of what was in his mind, and his blushes underscored it, for Miss Blint spoke to him sharply:

"Am I being rebuked?"

"Well, you remember what the upstairs boarder said when he shot the burglar: 'No offence intended, but you've busted into the wrong story.'"

"Very clever, I suppose; meaning that I have been badly brought up."

Her shallow brown eyes, close set and lively as a monkey's, were fastened on the third button of Buddy's waist-coat.

"I beg pardon, Miss Blint," he floundered. "It's change

of climate, I suppose. You see I'm not used to sea level yet."

"That's quite obvious," she told him, and again gave him the close-up of her shoulder blade.

During the rest of the dinner he had the satisfaction of hearing her appreciative cackle after Mr. Hurler's anecdotes. He was somewhat less lonesome, however, because he became engrossed in an observation of Mr. Middleton Knox, across the table. That gentleman, as though studying to offend, was wearing a dinner jacket. Buddy rather liked his clothes, which were not fussy or elaborately tailored like the costumes of the other men round the table. His neat black tie, his round-cut waistcoat, his moderately high, square-winged collar all expressed the same thought—that they belonged to Middleton Knox and had been found suitable. Buddy, whose mind was running morbidly on the subject of clothes that night, sat comparing Knox with his fellows. Blint, Hurler and the fat man to whom Mrs. Blint gave so much of her attention wore too many buttons and frills. The only thing Buddy didn't like about Knox's clothes was Knox. He had a sly, acrid, sarcastic, servile, cowardly face; Buddy could have shied a finger bowl at him for the way he was bulldozing the little woman in blue.

The ceremony of rising and permitting the ladies to retire came at last as a decided relief to Buddy, who now felt that the worst was over. Coffee, liqueurs and cigars of maximum calibre brought Knox within snubbing distance of Mr. Hurler. Mr. Blint deserted the fat gentleman and the youth with the vacant stare to pull up a chair next to Buddy's and make himself generally agreeable.

Ten minutes of talk touching on the condition of Super-cyanide convinced Buddy that Blint was a straightforward man, genuinely anxious to make things pleasant. The fact

had been bought to show—their handsome backs—in perfectly matched sets from the shelves of the dark-brown room they entered. From nicely spaced recesses the forms of fading Colonial gentlemen stared restfully out of their frames.

"Your ancestors?" asked Buddy, impressed by the pictures.

"They are now," declared Blint, twisting his little grey moustache in a whimsical smile. "Julia bought 'em from the decorator who did the place for us. He can supply any sex or period in ten days. Genuine fakes."

He slid a humidor across a carved table and they settled themselves into deep cushions.

"So you want to be introduced to Mrs. Dyvenot," said Blint at last, quizzically regarding the Westerner.

"Well, I'd like to know her." Buddy floundered. "And I thought that as long as you knew all about me you wouldn't mind fixing it up."

"I'd be glad to, my dear chap. But I've never met her."

"Never met her!" After his first astonishment Buddy recalled his Sunday supplement and quoted glibly: "Why, I thought she was a real society leader—that she went everywhere."

"She does—but I don't."

Blint's shaggy eyebrows came down over little grey eyes, wise and humorous as an elephant's.

"McNair, you haven't been long on this seaboard and you might not take it as an impertinence if I try to tell you something: Society in New York is divided, like cocktails, into two general classes—Bronx and Manhattan, with a thousand varieties of each. Of course Manhattan cocktails are rather out of style, but Manhattan society is the whole thing, if you care about that kind of thing. If you come to New York and choose Bronx—by that I mean the upper

West Side, from here to the Zoölogical Gardens—you're welcome at once and as good as in. You won't find us any more vulgar or foolish, taking us as we come, than the Manhattan set, and we spend almost as much money. We're the brains of New York in this section—engineers, able business men, lawyers, surgeons.

"But we're not society; not the kind of society that the servant girls read about in *Gossips' Weekly*, which they lend to their mistresses to enjoy on the sly. There's an invisible barrier running right through the centre of Central Park, separating the East Side from the West, and you can't shoot through it with a twelve-inch gun. 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'—unless the East can't help it." Blint chuckled.

"There's no municipal law against moving if you feel like it, is there?" Buddy went to the bottom of the question just as he had on the day he contemplated wasted gold among the tailings of Axe Creek Gulch.

"None whatever," complied Mr. Blint, chewing an expensive cigar. "And a lot of good it does! They're building apartment houses along Park Avenue to give the eternal Bronx the illusion of Manhattan. You can live there and rot in lonesomeness as far as the social register is concerned. But the two kinds of cocktail don't mix, believe me! No, McNair, you'll find us here in a row on Riverside Drive, living and spending like mad, all in a circle. The women keep up the society delusion, of course; and the men, if they amount to much, don't care. Occasionally a child is born among us, like a two-headed colt, with a freakish talent that will make an alliance across the park."

"I sort of thought money counted here, the way it does everywhere else," Buddy naively commented.

"If you've got enough and are not entirely impossible money can break you through, just by its dead weight. But

a millionaire is no celebrity in New York; there are three of them completely lost in this very apartment house. Old Senator Scrappel, who is one of the richest men in the world, built himself a nearly Buckingham Palace on Fifth Avenue. His wife gives house parties to girlhood friends from Buffalo. That's as near as Scrappel has gotten to the outside edge of the inner circle. He's a Bronx and always will be. And some of the greatest names that are printed belong to people who live in two or three lovely shabby old rooms on a good street. They were born Manhattan. Selah!

"I don't know what I've been drinking that's set me off this way," grinned Mr. Blint under his trim moustache. "Julia would murder me if she knew I was jabbing the bubbles. All the women, you know, except the ones who work and get their ideas straight, have got a sort of restless delusion about these things. Look at the way they allow that smart little grafted, Middleton Knox, to abuse and bulldoze them. Why? Because he's a poor relation, twelve times removed—by force—from some of the social high lights. He has little money and less manners; he's a prize prig and a cheap snob; but they're struggling round him in droves fighting for the privilege of touching a hem of his garment."

Mr. Blint dropped the butt of his cigar into a tray and smiled. "Of course," he went on with surprising candor, "if I had taken the pains to explain to my daughter who you are and what you represent she might have given you a pleasanter time. It isn't her fault entirely——"

"It certainly isn't!" acknowledged Buddy magnanimously. "She was mighty good to let me stick in the party at all, the way I'm rigged out."

"Clothes are a small matter," said Blint. "A good valet can arrange all that for you in a day or two. And I hope

you'll forgive my frankness. You belong in a way to my business family here, and I want to save you from some notions that have embittered a lot of men I know about."

"You think I'd better stick to Bronx?"

"If you don't you'll come to it," Blint pronounced the sentence.

Buddy McNair didn't answer. This hopeless point of view saddened him. How was he to meet Mrs. Dyvenot? And with men like Buddy—poets who sing in cattle, in cyanide or iambic pentameter—the more purely romantic a project the more painful its relinquishment.

"Well, I must be going."

"So early? You'll be saying good night to Mrs. Blint, won't you?"

Buddy had thought of that but hadn't known just how to go at it.

V

DOWNSTAIRS the black demon of the threshold accepted Buddy's fifty cents and called a taxicab for him. All the way back to the Merlinbilt he was in a dazed state of unrest and humiliation. He was perfectly aware of how ridiculous a figure he had cut quaking in his blue suit amid the Blint gold, silver and gilt. The worm-crushing look which that man Knox had given him upon his inquiry about Mrs. Dyvenot still rankled; the insinuation that there is in the world a human being whom you are not fit to know is not pleasant to anybody who still entertains one red corpuscle. The memory of Miss Doris Blint was like a bad taste in the mouth; but it was the kindly candid, philosophical speech of old Pontius Blint that most troubled Buddy's spirit.

The Blints had been born in New York. They had had money a long time—for several generations, possibly. And yet their women were aping and strutting, their every thought as false as their complexions, with but one idea in all the world—to become the intimates of people with whom they had no apparent common interest, who evidently had no desire to know them. It made him ashamed to think that he had quit the clean air of home and come to this mad babel for the same ignoble purpose. He had been in town, as he expressed it, about fifteen minutes, and had already discovered the sham of his quest. What right had he to suppose that the most beautiful woman in the world, sought by princes of blood and finance, would find interest in him? It made him sick.

Yet behind his tired consciousness sat his idealism unshaken. Blint had hinted at the loftiness of that tribe east of the Park—Venus lay again in that quarter of the heavens. Because the Blint women were shoddy imitations argued not that the real thing would prove unworthy. Blint had said that it couldn't be done. . . . Well, the wise old Doc Naylor had made similar prophecies as to Supercyanide; that heavy cynic had stuck to it that Buddy's specialty was the scientifically impossible. Yet Buddy had solved the problem by breaking all the rules; and there across the Park lay another riddle, forever intriguing his curious, naïve, idealistic mind. He had the money to spend for what he wanted, and he was determined to accept no substitutes.

As his taxicab jolted him round corners and crosstown to the Merlinbilt Buddy's persistency brought him back to his original intention. He was going to meet Mrs. Dyvenot and see for himself. If Blint found it ridiculously impossible to introduce him, Buddy knew who couldn't refuse the favour without violating a gentlemen's agreement—Terry Overbeek.

Next morning as he sat in his long flannel nightshirt on the edge of his bed he was practising dinner etiquette against another opportunity. With a comb in his right hand, a brush in his left, he rapidly gained skill by lifting a cake of soap off the bed at his left, raising it to the level of his shoulder and placing it carefully on the little stand before him. "How do you do, Mrs. Sweeny?" he would say with a stunning smile as he clamped the comb and brush upon the soap and lifted it from its imaginary platter to a phantom plate. It was a great deal like handling chop sticks, he inferred; and what a Chinaman could do he could do.

Buddy was just reaching out for another pantomimic

morsel—in fact, he had gotten the soap so securely tonged this time that the glory of achievement sat upon his smile as he raised the trophy aloft—when three sharp knocks upon the door caused him to release his hold. The soap bounded eagerly away across the carpet.

"Come in!" roared the man from Axe Creek.

A perfect gentleman, tall and thin, clad with a severity that was almost ecclesiastical, stole in and softly closed the door.

"I'm the 'ouse valet, sir," intimated the caller in a beautifully servile accent.

"Ghost of Great Henry!" prayed Buddy McNair.

The man was undoubtedly an Englishman. This was too good to be true.

"Yes, sir. I was informed that you wished me to care for your clothes."

"I haven't got any clothes," announced Buddy quite cheerfully.

The valet held his lifeless brown eyes upon the remarkable nightshirt and put into his glance that which implied that it was customary for guests to arrive at the Merlinb'lt draped as the angels are.

"And I want some."

"Very good, sir."

Buddy picked a wisp of paper money from a pile on the table. The valet bowed it into his pocket.

"My name's McNair. What's yours?"

"Jascomb, sir."

"Well, look here, Jass—you're a regular Englishman, aren't you?"

"Oh yes, sir. Quite regular, so to speak."

Buddy had studied English valetry in our current fiction and had seen one or two exponents in vaudeville sketches



"HAVE YOU GOT ANYTHING TO PROVE THAT
YOU'RE A GENUINE ENGLISH VALET?"



that had penetrated as far west as Axe Creek. The article was apparently genuine.

"I want the best there is," he announced. "Have you got anything to prove that you're a genuine English valet?"

For the first time the perfect gentleman showed a sign of human weakness. He flushed slightly.

"I was employed by the second Lord Hamwex for seven years. I make no doubt there are papers to prove my birth."

"I'll take your word for it, Jass. Now look here—do you know the difference between Bronx and Manhattan?"

"I have been in the States but a short time, sir. If you wish me to notify the bar——"

"I am speaking of clothes."

"Quite so, sir."

"I want the best there is"—Buddy repeated his favourite maxim—"and that's why I'm calling the doctor. I need a tailor—maybe two or three of them. Are Strutt & Stoll any good?"

"I make no doubt that they are—good, sir."

"That means that they're rotten. Now who's the best tailor there is?"

"There's Poole, of London, sir, and——"

"Yes, and there's Sing Fat, of Shanghai. What I'm interested in is New York clothes."

"Might I suggest Chesterfield & Chesterfield, sir? Quite our smartest young gentlemen favour them."

"Where does Terry Overbeek get his?"

This was an inspiration.

"Chesterfield & Chesterfield do his evening clothes, his morning coats and 'unting pinks. For lounge costumes, I think, sir, he goes to Hilaire. Theophile Zim designs his liveries, Porkington his outing costumes——"

"By Henry!" Buddy crossed sturdy bare legs under his flannel robe. "Jass, you're just the man I want."

Again he heard himself very properly thanked. He sat a while in contemplation of his bare toes. Anybody who isn't amused by his own bare toes has either no sense of form or no sense of humour.

"I could skimp along a while without any hunting pinks," he confided at last. "What I need is a coat and a pair of pants that fit me, and a dress suit. Do you think that Chesterfield & Chesterfield could fix me up by to-morrow afternoon?"

"That would be quite impossible, sir."

Jascomb showed emotion. Indeed he might, for Buddy's air was downcast and forlorn. He contemplated a fashionable call in the near future, and he had utterly lost faith in Abe Zinz's latest-style costume, which now lay, a shapeless wad, in an adjacent chair.

"If you wouldn't mind my saying so, sir," suggested Jascomb in his soothing tone, "couldn't you make a ready-to-wear suit do you until the others are finished?"

"I've got one!" sighed Buddy, never looking up.

"You would be surprised, sir, if you knew how many of our young gentlemen are wearing them."

"Do you know Middleton Knox?" asked Buddy, shooting quite at random.

"Mr. Knox lunches here often, sir."

"Well, where does he get his clothes?"

"I have often heard, sir, that he buys them ready-to-wear at Claymoor & Co.'s."

"Lead me forth!" commanded Buddy.

"I beg pardon, sir?" inquired the perfect valet, nervously regarding the one-piece shroud.

"Look here, Jass—what would the proprietor say if I

hired you for the morning to go round with me and steer me straight?"

"I make no doubt, sir, that it could be arranged."

"I've got more money than sense, Jass. And the services of an English vallyay would do me more good than a college education. You needn't be afraid of your job. If the management fires you I'll take you on by the year at your own price."

"Thank you, sir."

Jascomb was bowing himself out with a promise of returning at eleven o'clock, when Buddy intercepted his flight with another question.

"Jass."

"Yes, Mr. McNair?"

"What do ladies do to their eyebrows that makes them loop up like fishhooks?"

"They shave them, sir," announced Jascomb, and closed the door upon the disturbing information.

The Empire clock over the mantel had scarce begun to strike eleven and Buddy had barely lifted the first strap of his Axe Creek suspenders when Jascomb reappeared, this time in the mournful garments proper to the street-going valet.

"If I might say so," softly insinuated the helpful one, "you have a neatly turned figure—much like that of Mr. Middleton Knox."

"You've got me at a disadvantage," growled Buddy, nervously easing himself into the armholes which his temporary retainer held for him. So set was he in his purpose that he even submitted to having his coat tails pulled down under his overcoat, an attention whose personal nature had never appealed to him.

At a corner of Madison Avenue he was led into a department store, which apparently was patronised exclusively by

the sporting nobility. From a floorful of exotic neckwear and hosiery, where showers of delicately hued silken trifles were carefully hand-picked by his adviser, he was elevated to a templed vault, where rows of fashionable outer garments lay sanctimoniously folded on long tables over which solemn diplomats presided. There he learned that a morning coat was for afternoon wear, that a lounge suit didn't imply pyjamas, that it wasn't always correct to wear a dinner jacket when one was dining. There he found himself parading in neatly fitting costumes, a slave to vanity. Jascomb, who proved himself a hard boss, waved aside vigorous pin-check patterns and Mactavish plaids in favour of a slate-blue effect which reminded Buddy unpleasantly of the poker player on the D. & R. G.

The morning coat, after all, turned out to be nothing more radical than the old-fashioned cutaway, rather becomingly tailored and with a plutocratic line of white piqué under the V of the waistcoat. Buddy stood firm for a dinner jacket, because he had seen Middleton Knox bulldoze the entire Blint party in such a costume. Jascomb had admitted that Mr. McNair had something the same figure as Mr. Knox; but his will was of iron and he uncompromisingly condemned the dinner jacket in order to force his charge into an evening suit, which, he insisted, would tide him over until his emergence into genuine grandeur.

Buddy was delighted to know that the slate-blue costume could be worn away without alteration; and when he had gotten inside it and came forth from the dressing room, timid as a moth from its cocoon, the house valet looked his approval and touched a button to signal an elevator for the hat, boot and glove department.

Fortified by Jascomb's ripe experience Buddy followed out his system of dress as you buy, with the result that a little after one o'clock he stood in front of Claymoor &

Co.'s department store for dukes, a Malacca stick held stiffly in one of his cape-gloved hands, a rather short loose over-coat of rough material across his shoulders, flat-soled boots comforting the victims of Abe's yellow squeakers, a brownish soft hat sitting somewhat too loosely, he thought, on his head. A woollen muffler at his throat concealed the glory of his shirting, but its presence was felt; and Buddy could not forbear a kingly glance along the flower shops of Madison Avenue.

The efficient Jascomb having indicated several firms which had beautified Mr. Overbeek to their own enrichment resigned in favour of the Merlinbilt.

"Do I look the part?" asked Buddy, somewhat panic-stricken at being deserted.

"Might I suggest a barber, sir?" asked the man in the sad black clothes, standing a deferential pace away.

"For my eyebrows?" Buddy was at last on the brink of rebellion.

"Your hair, sir."

A new cape glove went up to the over-luxurious locks.

"It isn't the length so much, sir. But in the back——"

"A little woolly, you mean?"

"Oh no, sir—not that! But unless you fancy it that way, sir, couldn't you tell the barber not to shave your neck?"

"By Henry, what you say goes, Jass!"

"Thank you, sir."

Jascomb lifted his hat as though deserting a beloved lady.

VI

AFTER lurching in the swollen magnificence of a railroad hotel and submitting his head to a neck-respecting barber Buddy followed in the footsteps of the fashionable to the shop of Chesterfield & Chesterfield, which he found modestly snuggling on a second floor adjacent to Fifth Avenue. The Chesterfield who handled him there was a Jascomb multiplied to a high voltage. He overcame him with gentle tyrannies, measured him for four formal costumes, and dismissed him with the assurance that his credit would be looked into. Hilaire, the wizard of lounge suits, persuaded him into an elaborate wardrobe, which he would be permitted to try on in due time.

The psychology of greatness lies between the long mirrors of the tailor shop. The atmosphere there is feudal; every item, from the bolts of imported cloths on the long shelves to the Georgian woodcuts on the smartly papered walls, conduces to megalomania on the part of the client. Man in the throes of romantic passion flies to his tailor to be equipped in the livery of lovers. Despotism planning magnificent tyrannies steps from the seven-passenger car to the tailor's dais, and submitting his fat paunch to a slavish tape measure imagines that the world is already under his feet.

To what sanctuary did Nero repair upon such black moments as brought to him a sneaking suspicion that there had been a fluke somewhere and that he wasn't a god after all? To the Temple of Neptune, forsooth, or the iron gates of Mars? Nay, nay, Claudia. To the marbled shop of his little Greek tailor strode the wicked tyrant there to

have all his sins idealised in a smart robe of saffron with a military girdle and a snappy touch of Lesbian embroidery at the hem.

Thus Buddy, having ordered some five hundred dollars' worth of knockabout clothes stood before the pier glass of Hilaire's outer office and reflected upon his own reflection. He hung the crook of his cane over his right forearm as he had seen them do it on Fifth Avenue, and brought his soft muffler a little higher above the wide collar of his greenish-tan overcoat. He turned his rakish brown hat to one side and noted the artful gradations by which the barber had levelled his hair to the back of his neck.

"Do I look the part?" he chuckled; and whistling a jaunty air he swung out of the place. Mr. Hilaire himself came forward to show him to the door.

Once upon Fifth Avenue his heartened mood encouraged him to go forth and see this mysterious east of the park, which, according to the creed of Blint, never touched the west. It was nearly the hour of five as he sauntered slowly uptown, swinging his new cane and marvelling at the comfort of his new shoes.

A hundred million dollars' worth of automobiles choked the wide space between wealth-laden shops, stopping as though hauled by a common chain whenever the traffic policeman's semaphore swung round; finely furred ladies, like rare forest animals with angelic faces, passed him and were bowed to by gentlemen no better clad than was Buddy McNair at that moment; birds of paradise stepped out of glistening vehicles into onyx-fronted shops whose windows flashed with crown jewels; vain and violet virgins, their thin silk stockings and perilous slippers bobbing below coats of Eskimo warmth, led little woolly dogs as perky and absurd as themselves; old gentlemen with the drooping moustachios of hereditary lords lifted their grey-gaitered

feet with overpowering pomposity—which reminded Buddy that he must get a pair of those darn things that you wear over your shoes. The air was electric, the carved granite bluffs standing out as clear as Colorado cliffs at sunset. Bluffs! And, Buddy McNair, not lonesome at that moment, felt himself in the midst of it, seeking the finer gold that must be there.

A little beyond the corner of the park great residences loomed, displaying every variety of architectural pride in their bellying windows and encrusted façades. It would be his job pretty soon, he reminded himself pleasantly, to look into the matter of real estate.

What impressed him most along this stretch of avenue were the doors; they were magnificently intolerant doors, heavy with wrought iron and ornate bronze, glittering with cut glass and rosy with silk hangings beyond frosty lace. More than anything else he saw they managed to give the impression of ornamental selfishness—gate-ways of fortified egotism, ever ready to clang the challenge, "If you're not in stay out!"

There loomed a structure in the upper Sixties which most engaged the observant mood of Gilbert Kernochan McNair. It was such a place as he would rather like to build—a hotel of a place with a multitude of gracefully pointed windows, balconies floreate with carving, two snarling little lions standing guard beside the entrance, which was superbly arched and overhung with Gothic monsters. Buddy took it all in, loitering a long time and attempting to calculate on the monthly bill for hired help. Contact with New York's fashionable tailors had quickened his ambition a pace beyond the normal.

A policeman came sauntering along and was just accelerating his ponderous footsteps to meet a nursery governess

in a wonderful brown coat and streamered bonnet when Buddy exercised his civilian privilege.

"Say, who lives in that house?"

The policeman turned his blank fat gaze toward the proud façade and then to Buddy before replying.

"Stranger?"

"Is it a secret you keep from the outside world?"

"Not always."

The wonderfully costumed nursemaid was passing by, so the policeman hastened to add "Terrill Overbeek."

Buddy now felt a more intimate concern in the elaborate building. There seemed to be about a thousand windows, and so far as he could see nothing to indicate human occupation. Dark-blue shades had been pulled tight on every floor; nowhere did a white curtain flutter its cheery message to the passer-by.

Overbeek's invitation, his almost dogged insistence that the Westerner come round to him and ask a favour, formed an impulse in Buddy's mind. There was not after all any time like now. Contemplation of his new overcoat and the feel of his yellow cane under his correct glove gave Buddy McNair an unaccustomed boldness. Without ado he stepped to the fortified entrance and touched the bell.

Somewhere within the mystery there echoed a deep gurgle —then silence. He stood long and wearily beside the snarling lion, while New York, in passing, tendered him looks of indifferent curiosity, as much as to wonder what brash suppliant was ringing now at the Kremlin door. After another cold pause Buddy rang again. Another echoing gurgle.

Presently came the creaking of bolts and hinges, heard distantly like dungeon fears in dreams. Knobs turned, latches lifted, and at last a living corpse in the sagging

alpaca jacket of a flunky at ease swung back a section of the iron grille.

"Is Mr. Overbeek at home?" asked Buddy, feeling as if one of the little lions had bitten him.

"No, sir. Not at 'ome."

"Well, will you tell him that Gilbert K. McNair—Buddy McNair—had called——"

He seemed to be having a dreadful time with his name. He had apparently implied a deadly insult, for the man's hateful stare never relaxed.

"Your card, sir?"

This clanged out like the grating of the iron door. Buddy fumbled.

"I think I've lost 'em. He'll remember me."

"Mr. Overbeek is out of town," proclaimed the living corpse at last.

"That's too bad," said Buddy, somehow relieved. "I'll ring him up when he gets back."

"That's very uncertain, sir."

It was apparent that the servant had a murderous impulse to slam the door and decapitate Buddy.

"Why? Doesn't he ever come home?"

"At times. But he travels a great deal. Sometimes he is in New York for a week at a time; then again he may stop here overnight on his way South."

This was an unexpected confidence for the living corpse, and he evidently repented it when Buddy conjectured: "Seems to me this place would make a fine hospital if Mr. Overbeek's through with it."

"No doubt, sir," agreed the man, and began locking the grille.

Buddy turned down Fifth Avenue with a feeling of having been repulsed and rebuked in the same breath. The Overbeek flunky couldn't hold a candle to Jass as a servant,

he reflected as he trudged along. The man had put a cold shower down the neck of his dashing New York suit; and for the first time Buddy had that unloved, unconsidered feeling commonly sensed by visitors in our metropolis.

His mournful cogitations had brought him down Fifth Avenue as far as the splendid idle Forties when he came dramatically upon that which increased his impatience with himself and his disgust with New York.

As he stood at a corner waiting for the traffic policeman's semaphore to whirl from red to green he was aware of a pleasant face at the little round porthole in the side of a passing hansom. His interest was at first purely æsthetic, for the face in the round frame was of the sort designed by Nature to gladden the eye. Wavy hair showed under a small hat with blue wings at the sides. The deep-blue eyes were sparkling, the lips curved to a smile. Objectively it was a bonny sight to see, like a luring and exceptionally well-drawn cover on a popular magazine. Subjectively it outraged every lofty instinct within the soul of Buddy McNair.

For there at that tiny window, close enough for him to tap with his new Malacca stick, smiled the perfidious girl who had picked him up in a Pullman and robbed him of eleven thousand five hundred dollars.

His first impulse was to shout her name; but it is impossible—outside of politics—to shout what you do not know. Her theosophical aunt, he remembered her telling him, had given her the cryptic name of Plowa.

He opened his mouth like a man in a nightmare and attempted to shout "Plowa!" at the top of his lungs, but only a ridiculous gargling sound came. Meanwhile the hansom had wheeled into the jam of traffic. Buddy got just one glimpse of her companion, a nice-looking young man in a greenish coat something like his own. The two

heads were quite prettily close together, and both were laughing merrily. Perhaps she had seen him. Perhaps she was making sport of him to a companion in crime.

The man from Axe Creek stood rooted to the pavement until the hansom was lost in a down slope of the avenue. They were gazing into each other's eyes—the romantically objectionable picture lingered. Perhaps she had reached the point in her dialogue where the new prize was being besought for the story of his life. Possibly she had her hand already in his overcoat pocket. Faugh! And Buddy McNair had once laughed at Doc Naylor when the Doc, in a cynic humour, had declared that all the high-class hold-ups got to New York eventually!

So fell Icarus on his wings of wax.

When he reached the tapestry-brick front of the Merlinbilt there remained in Buddy no keen taste for the fine pleasures which only a week ago he had associated with the spending of money in the only American port where money can buy the best. Already he was speculating as to what he would do with all his new clothes when he got back to Axe Creek.

He brought his dark mood into the Merlinbilt's small but distinguished lobby, and the first thing he saw of course was the man whom, of his small acquaintance in the East, he most despised.

In the centre of the rug Middleton Knox, attired with his usual modest care, was bidding good-bye to a party of ladies, who chattered round him like birds at feeding time and basked in the rays of his chary smile. Buddy merely glared and sought to escape round the flower stand, when to his ineffable chagrin he heard his name called from behind, and facing about beheld the important Mr. Knox coming toward him with extended hand.

"I say, McNair! How do you do?"

Buddy made a limp attempt at a handshake, meanwhile yearning to push the man over the balustrade of the bar-room stairs.

"Pretty well, Knox. And how are you?"

He was deliberately attempting an imitation of that arrogant drawl.

"I promised Blint that I'd look after you; you'll need a shepherd for a while, I fancy."

All against his will Buddy found himself being elbow-led down the winding stairs toward the bar.

They seated themselves at one of the little tables under a complication of arches. And after they had laid aside their overcoats on an extra chair Buddy could see this man whom he detested taking in every detail of his newly acquired outfit. He winced as though a police inspector were stripping him, one piece at a time, and going through his clothes for stolen property. Knox rang for the waiter.

"I thought I might take you over to the Cardigan Club for lunch some time," the worldly one was going on in an apparent attempt to be genial. "Let me see what days I have free. There's the Law Club, Thursday; and I've promised Mrs. Van Laerens for the week-end. There's a pretty full slate next week. How about a week from Wednesday?"

"I can stand it if you can," said Buddy, cheered by his own rudeness.

Middleton Knox had again fixed his dry, peevish eyes upon Buddy's slate-grey suit and delicately tinted shirt.

"By George, McNair!" he exclaimed in a most patronising tone, "you have spruced up a bit."

"Praise from the great is praise indeed," replied Buddy, pleased in spite of himself.

"That's rather a decent suit—if I might say so. Some

one's taken you by the hand. Who's your tailor—if I might ask?"

"Ready-made." A certain tomcatishness had entered his mood and heartened him greatly.

"You don't mean to tell me!" Knox gave his hard little mouth a slightly contemptuous smile.

"Yes," drawled Buddy; "I was in a hurry for some hand-me-downs, so I bought me an outfit at the best store in the world."

"And what is that, please?"

"The place where you get yours."

Knox's wedge-shaped face retained its smile, but he didn't answer. He twitched suddenly toward the waiter and scolded impatiently: "How often do I have to call you? Take the orders, please! McNair, what will you have?"

"Manhattan," said Buddy.

"I'll have a Bronx. Better change your mind, McNair. Nobody ever drinks Manhattans any more."

"Maybe not. I wasn't thinking so much about the drink as the idea."

VII

THE next morning found Buddy McNair with a headache, expensively acquired the night before. He had wandered lonely as a cloud among the electric lighted daffodils of Broadway, where he had tested the Manhattan cocktail in many guises. He had a memory this morning of varicoloured arc lights going round in vast boreal pin wheels proclaiming The Hit of the Year or 1001 Consecutive Nights. His ears were full of music in which trombones brayed, African tenors whooped, cowbells rang, and things seemed to be falling downstairs amid wonderfully syncopated harmonies.

At one of the brightest bars in town he had met up with Job Twiller, a mining man from the Virginia district, who was being convoyed by a mixed flotilla. Some one had proposed dinner at the Cloudland Cabaret and Buddy had confusedly followed. They had eaten things; and out of the vague, skirts had appeared, twirled, disappeared; and then they had eaten some more.

Twiller had been comatose most of the time. Buddy had enjoyed the sensation of one who having taken forbidden drugs is rather pleasantly enraptured. Somebody had proposed the Insomnia Roof. The Insomnia Roof it was, then; and they had gotten a table under a glass bridge which the ladies of the chorus, much to Buddy's discomfiture, seemed to be using as a runway between their dressing rooms and the dancing floor. The Pansy Varieties in Axe Creek had never been rough like this. Buddy had always associated this kind of thing with back streets. Yet

here it was, going full blast under a million dollars' worth of electric lights, crowds of people, dressed almost like ladies and gentlemen, howling their delight at every change in the hosiery display. A bogus French count got up and sang a suggestive song, with all the suggestions carefully pointed out; the audience went wild, banging little hammers upon the tables and howling for more and worse.

A girl, dressed in the American flag—a fair sized one, it's true—skipped to the centre of the floor and explained in a soprano as violent as her gestures, "Uncle Sammy is a rounder like the rest." Buddy called for the check. It cost forty-seven dollars to get out, but the escape was worth it.

So here like a pampered duchess lay Buddy, a pink satin coverlid over him, dainty French prints on the panelled walls of his bedroom in the Merlinbilt. He had breakfasted on effervescent sedatives and was reading from the yellowest of the New York newspapers, which lay scattered over the rug. On the fourth page, under the caption Siftings from the Smart Set, he found a full-length portrait of Mrs. Pat Dyvenot, again wearing that string of precious birds' eggs round her swanlike neck. She swayed like a lily in the long panel, her clear eyes regarding a world created to do her homage. Buddy, prostrate upon the pillows, sighed and contemplated his own five-feet-seven. He wondered just how much she would look down at him when he met her.

He was midparagraph in the item which announced her assistance to the Duchess of Gush in the Pink Fête for Crippled Cab Horses when the telephone rang and he recognised Pontius Blint's voice floating over the miracle of Manhattan. Blint was evidently willing to try him again.

"We'll have a box at the opera to-night," he tempted,

"and we'd be tickled to death if you'd join us. It's Aida and you might like to see Caruso—and hear him."

"Thank you very kindly," Buddy was quick to say; "I just got my dress suit."

"Good. We'll meet you in the foyer at a quarter past eight."

Shortly after Jass had come in to dress his patron for the day Mr. Job Twiller was announced and subsequently shown up. The new valet was easing Buddy into his trousers at the moment the eminent Mr. Twiller entered the door. He was an enormous man with a dyed moustache, little bloodshot eyes, and the style of black felt hat affected by politicians of democratic tendencies. He stood in the door, agape at the tableau of the kneeling slave and the leg-raised master. At last he came to a stoop in the attitude of a catcher behind the bat; he brought his big hands together, opened his mouth and emitted a series of bleats—tiny sounds to come from so vast a structure.

Jascomb, adjusting new gold buckled suspenders at the moment, permitted himself just the slightest glance of disapproval.

"Ba-a-a-a-a! By Judas!" chortled the mirthful Polyphemus. "Got a hired man to put on his pants!"

"If you don't like it you don't need to eat it," Buddy pointed out with a dignity he had borrowed from his man.

"Like it!" bleated Job. "If I don't tell Doc Naylor on you if I ever get back to camp!"

"You'll never get back then," threatened the backslider.

Job Twiller sat crushingly upon a small chair and gazed round eyed while Jass presented to his master a becoming cravat, nicely adjusted into the folds of a fashionable collar.

"A hired man to button him up!" moaned the visitor, speaking quite impersonally.

"You get used to it," Buddy stiffly explained. And when Jass had stepped out of the room the hulking miner leaned over and whispered behind his hand, "Say, Buddy, is he one of them vallays?"

"You bet!" Buddy whispered in reply. And a boyish pride inspired him to add, "And not only that—he's a genuine English vally, too."

"No!"

"Regular Englishman—got papers to prove it!"

"Well, Buddy, you're goin' the whole hog, I'll say that for you. You're varnishin' the stick on both ends. That's the trick if you're out for high society."

And he greeted Jascomb's return with a look of reverence.

Buddy was intending to take Mr. Twiller round the circle on a Seeing New York tour; but after luncheon it proved that the metropolis had but one interesting feature, in the miner's estimation. A moving-picture house in Forty-second Street was giving a realistic Western production showing every phase of life in the gold mines, with the fourth reel culminating in a fight round a ruined shaft house. It was an engrossing afternoon for these two wanderers who had crossed the continent to get acquainted with the East.

At a quarter past six that evening Jass was back again with the new dress clothes faultlessly pressed. He diagnosed Buddy with scientific minuteness, saw that his chin was properly smooth, plunged him into a bath of the correct temperature, dried him like a new-born babe, eased him into his underwear and smoothly adjusted the silk hosiery which his experienced eye had picked from the stock of Claymoor & Co.

Buddy, a band of pearly white choking him at the throat,

a cravat of Jascomb's tying winging daintily under his spotless muffler, a new silk hat somewhat jauntily set on the back of his head, appeared in the foyer of the Metropolitan Opera House a few minutes early. The Blints, being New Yorkers, came a few minutes late. He was already stewing in his patent-leather shoes when Mrs. Blint in a futuristic evening wrap and an extra coat of cosmetics rushed to greet him effusively. His perfect attire made so evident an impression as to give him a new sense of power. He had a feeling of being better dressed than the superpleated Greek god, Mr. Hurler, whose hat was potted on a slope, like a French comedian's.

The box they entered on the grand tier had a brass plate engraved "Boris Kłowski" on its mahogany door. Mr. Blint was not a subscriber. He didn't have to be. One close to the ear of power finds that many things come his way; among them opera boxes from time to time. The house was in semidarkness when they came in, and the broad stage, a flare of colour, revealed some Neapolitan artist's idea of a temple in ancient Memphis. A multitude of persons, who from a distance looked to Buddy's inexperienced eye like bearded ladies in spotless nightgowns, raised their hands together and shouted in unison while a fat priest at an altar gesticulated over an equally fat warrior below.

It was all very noisy and confusing, and Buddy, taking advantage of a crack of light by the door, attempted to get his bearings out of a libretto he had purchased in the lobby. Unfortunately he found only the Italian version, affably explaining:

"Scena V—*Interno del tempio di Vulcano a Memphi—Una luca misteriosa scende dall' altro—Una lunga fila di colonne . . .*"

He made haste to be seated, because Miss Blint was making haughty gestures; and it was their mutual misfortune to occupy adjacent chairs again. Of the Italian explanation Buddy made nothing, except possibly that "*una lunga fila di colonne*" might mean "one lung filled with cologne," and in that case he thought the chorus was certainly doing very well.

"Caruso!" whispered the superior Doris, indicating the stout warrior, who had then half-turned and was carolling bravely:

"Nume, che duce ed arbitro—"

Buddy, who had often heard him on the phonograph, was disappointed.

"Isn't he a splendid Egyptian!" Doris thrilled, *sotto voce*.

"He looks like the whole mummy case," agreed Buddy.

Being no artist himself, the hundred-thousand-dollar bellows which the great Italian directed toward the diamond horseshoe missed their mark as far as Buddy was concerned. He didn't know much about Egypt, but he was pretty sure it wasn't like that. In all the illustrated books on Egypt the inhabitants had been pictured as skinny coloured men with Turkish towels round their waists, two-quart cans on their heads, and a style of walking which implied that the ancient dwellers of the Nile got from place to place on a tight rope.

He told Miss Blint as much when the curtain went down and the lights came up. He said he didn't believe a successful lover, even in the days of Pharaoh, could wear a figure similar to that of our heaviest ex-president. He found an English synopsis called Argument in the front of the booklet and he showed this to Miss Blint to prove his case.

"She's pretty good for a coon," he commented, distracting Doris for a moment from her staring round the boxes.

"I'm sorry," she acknowledged, leaning toward him.

"It seems this Aida was an African girl and all the royal court went balmy about her. I'm just as strict for the colour line as anybody else, but I say if she can get away with it bully for her!"

Miss Blint rewarded this with a withering glance and turned her attention to Mr. Hurler.

Down below the great body of the house appeared like a giant's flower bed, mathematically laid out, bedewed with precious gems. The white flowers were shirt fronts; the blue, purple, red and yellow glowed from expensive evening toilets; and the delicate rosebud pink shone from ladies' shoulders and gentlemen's bald spots. Miss Blint was useful here, for she seemed to be a connoisseur of everything that was Manhattan.

"That's Mrs. Courland Reichart—four boxes to the right. No, the one with the jewelled bandeau."

She became quite animated and almost cordial in the play of her favourite game, which was picking out personages from a distance.

"You mean the fat one?" asked Buddy in an awed whisper.

"Silly! They're all fat in that box. The one looking this way with the opera glasses. The short one just coming in is Tauchnitz Fielding—you remember the owfully cutting things Gossips' Weekly said about him in this issue. The third box is Sagan Rae's, but the Willie Crambuns have taken it since Sagan was committed to a sanitarium. Don't you think Mrs. Willie Crambun looks owfully absurd?"

"Owfully," echoed Buddy, taking in the skinny dowager, who, ablaze from head to waist, blinked comically from

right to left through her ridiculously small lorgnons and gave the impression of some rare and precious specimen of the beetle family.

"These are all Manhattans, I suppose?" asked Buddy, his eyes sweeping the tier. Apparently Miss Blint was not familiar with her father's classification, for she turned her hectic eyes upon him and said "I'm sorry."

This remark had about as much bearing on the case as Jascomb's perpetual "Thank you, sir."

"I mean," said Buddy, "are all these folks inside the little ring?"

"Society, you mean?"

"That's what I was trying to say."

"Well, rather!"

For years Buddy had made a theoretical study of the diamond horseshoe through the medium of the Sunday press. In actuality it was somewhat disappointing. There were jewels, to be sure—possibly a quantity of them—but he had pictured in his mind an auroral glow, a solid breast-works of gems, now rosying the dusk with ruby lights, now blinding the eyes with diamond flashes, and anon bringing emeralds into play until the air was kaleidoscopic with magic radiance. Instead he saw rows of more or less homely people sitting in satin chairs and chatting in a loop of golden cages. Several of the cages were empty and Buddy inferred that the opera wasn't doing very well. When he confided this to Miss Blint she adjusted her mask to an angle of coquetry and giggled, "You're owfully funny!"

"Well, in Axe Creek when the Pansy Varieties fails to fill up the boxes they call the show a flivver and change the bill."

"You needn't be afraid of this show being a flivver," she reassured him.

"But half the boxes are empty."

"Oh, that!" Again she giggled. "You know, it's considered awfully bourgeois to be on time for anything in New York. Mahmah's always nagging poor daddy because he wants to be early to everything. It's considered good form to come in after the first act. You see, the seventh box to the left is just filling up—and there come the Pelsiveres—and—"

Suddenly her shallow eyes swam into the next box at the right and nudging Buddy with a whitened elbow she whispered, "There she is!"

A party of four came in, laughing rather boisterously.

A pretty woman in pale grey showed deep dimples at the corners of her smile as she looked back upon the somewhat fat Adonis at her shoulder. There was a wheezy bald old fellow who hovered about, and lifting a white furred wrap revealed the Lady in Coral.

She was of medium height, which, as Buddy mentally calculated, was about his own; but the poise of her little head on its white pillar suggested a habitude of looking far over plebeian heads. Her hair, which was tawny, was rather coarse; but it was brilliant and gave the appearance of some fine-spun metal on an Italian figurine. As she rested a slim hand on the velvet railing that hand and the arm above it seemed made for just such soft contacts—they were jewels, cut and polished, to be laid upon velvet cushions. Round her neck, falling over her fair bosom, was a double string of creamy pearls, lustrous and of impressive size.

She was not averse to the public stare apparently, for she stood there several minutes, permitting the glasses to focus on her while she picked out friends here and there to favour with the royal nod. She was more lovely than he had anticipated.

"Mrs. Pat Dyvenot!" whispered the excited voice at Buddy's ear.

Buddy tried hard to swallow.

She must have heard, for she slightly lifted her brows and gave the Blint party the fraction of a glance out of her narrow eyes—a glance that as much as said, "And what business is it of yours?"

The next act was a blur to Buddy McNair—a beautiful, heartbreaking blur in which he was aware of the perfect woman somewhere near him in a satin chair just like the one he occupied. Fortunately for him Miss Blint gave him up and took to buzzing with her Mr. Hurler. Through the twilight he could see the outline of Mrs. Dyvenot leaning very close to her fat Adonis, flirting busily in her clear treble, paying no attention to the expensive efforts on the stage.

Frenzies of jealousy and despair, though spouted by more or less incorrectly dressed foreigners in a language he could not understand, began to take on meaning to Buddy McNair. The presence of that appealing beauty dimly revealed in the twilit box so near imparted to his spirit an alchemic change. He found himself in sympathy with the lovelorn slave girl, wailing her desperation at the palmy gates of Thebes. He knew now that there was a place for music, that somewhere in the elfin history of our planet people had thought in accorded sounds. The music, which only half an hour ago he had thought fantastic and as unnecessary as life on the moon, now touched him, moaned his own inexplicable pain.

And that was quite natural. When you live in Luna you normally think with the lunatics.

Mrs. Pat Dyvenot continued to disregard the performance. Buddy didn't think it rude. He could have stood

forth and slaughtered armies in defence of her taste. Her small tinkling comments came to him in scraps.

"Carlo, poor dear, why should you always be a savage?"

"Because I am still human in spite of something," growled a foreign accent.

And Buddy recalled the face of Prince Carlo Kulik, the Bulgarian noble whose portrait had adorned a lower point of her star in that Sunday-supplement article. She continued talking throughout the act. Music began to wear away its spell upon Buddy's soul and he was wild with impatience for the lights to come on again.

When false day dawned from the ornate ceiling Buddy caught the unwelcome spectacle of Mrs. Dyvenot and Prince Carlo still absorbed in their flirtation. Mr. Blint had no sooner come and taken the chair beside Buddy's than the door of the next box opened and Middleton Knox stepped out of the void. He was dressed with his customary modest perfection; but in his whole attitude the man from Axe Creek saw a marked difference. It was as though the dinner table, at which Buddy had first seen the Knox style of snobbishness, had been turned against Knox. He fawned over the stubby hand of the bald-headed gentleman, who was evidently giving the party, and received rather a sparse reception all round. Mrs. Dyvenot, who appeared to have at least good-natured tolerance for every one, smiled up at the obsequious bow. He stood over her chair in much the same politely crushed pose, Buddy thought, as Jascomb affected during tense moments in toilet-building. Prince Carlo was evidently annoyed at the interruption, but Mrs. Dyvenot gave the new worshipper her amused smile and narrowing eyes.

"When I hear her dismal wail again"—Knox was having at the prima donna—"I wonder why I continue to come."

"I often wonder the same thing, Middie," smiled Mrs. Dyvenot without a trace of rancour.

"It's a habit, like sleepwalking," grumbled the erst proud one; and it was a joy to Buddy to see him flounder.

At that moment Knox happened to look over and catch sight of the Blint party.

"How are you, Middie?" sang out Blint, who was nearest to contact.

"How do you do?" The greeting was as icy as it was intended to be.

Middleton Knox ducked his head once to the Blint ladies, and when his eyes rested upon Buddy it was with a gaze that went through and beyond. A few moments later he backed out of the royal box and was seen no more.

"That's Middie Knox all over," chuckled Blint good humouredly. "When he's in Fairmont Garland's box he goes blind in one eye."

"You can't whistle and sing at the same time," was Buddy McNair's musical criticism.

Society was apparently a restless tribe. They were forever getting up and changing round and going away and coming back again. Mr. Blint seemed to catch the spirit and invited the men out for a drink. Miss Blint, being whimsical, insisted on Mr. Hurler's remaining, so Blint and Buddy went together to the café. Buddy was a poor companion. He was mad to get back, to hover near the elbow beautiful and feast his eyes while the blessed light remained.

When at last he took his seat in Mr. Blint's very temporary box he found that the Fairmont Garland party had been joined by more visitors round.

Mrs. Dyvenot was frivolously standing off a group of male admirers.

"Why stay and be bored?" a carrot headed young man was urging, to the evident discomfiture of Prince Carlo.

"Tommy, you're always in a hurry!" she accused, looking up into the auburn eyes. The big pearls seemed almost to rattle together with her teasing gestures. "Do be respectable for once and stay out the performance."

"I know; but this is the very edge of the evening. Let's all be sensible."

Just where the sensibleness lay Buddy never knew. Everybody stood up, and the next he realised the entire Garland party was filing out.

The following act was an aimless shouting void to Buddy McNair. His patent-leather shoes hurt him. He wanted to go somewhere where they played American music and you could drink while you listened. In the next brightening after the falling curtain he saw in the Garland box nothing more appealing than a disarrayed colony of rose satin chairs.

The performance was over so far as Buddy was concerned; Doris Blint, too, began to fidget. But Mrs. Blint, who was sentimental somewhere under the enamel, insisted upon staying through the death scene. Down in the sub-cellars of Vulcan's temple Radames, disguised in a Russian blouse, wailed his last into the dead ear of the African lady. This brought down the curtain, and the Blints set up an argument as to where they should sup.

Outside the Metropolitan just as they were entering the Blint car Buddy caught sight of an anxious group making conspiratorial gestures round the carriage man, who stood with a puzzled look, his movements expressive of emphatic denial. The stout man in the circle was Prince Carlo Kulik of Bulgaria, and in the pale, rather anxious face turned up to the uniformed person Buddy again recognised Mrs. Pat Dyvenot.

"I thought Mrs. Dyvenot had gone home," he said, following his party into the car. But Miss Blint was too busily

engaged in a quarrel with her mother to give the remark the attention it deserved.

They went to the correct hotel for champagne and things in silver dishes. Like strains of music the memory of the Sunday-supplement lady came back to him, haunting him with a pleasant melancholy. And like a scene of darkest intrigue, tuned to a deep sneaky minor, came that glimpse he had caught of her out in the street. Had she been in trouble? Buddy hated himself to think that he had not gone boldly up to her and offered his poor services in her behalf. He even glanced round the long oval dining-room in hope of catching sight of her coral gown and that fabulous double chain of pearls.

Mrs. Blint, whose mania, no less than her daughter's, was the inner life of the fashionable, seemed also to have Mrs. Dyvenot on her mind. Fussing with the fruit cocktail—which Buddy after giving her method a sidewise study had courage to tackle—she confessed she didn't see how Mrs. Pat was going to settle her life, after throwing over poor Pat; and no one could blame her for that, heaven knew! Everybody had thought it would be Terry Overbeek next, but she had been too much for Terry, and Terry was sulking away from New York most of the time now. Apparently she had gotten that Bulgarian prince thoroughly tamed, but you can't get blood out of a turnip.

"How about a beet?" snickered Mr. Hurler, who scored as a humorist every now and again.

"She couldn't keep Carlo in the style to which he is accustomed. And nobody ever noticed that Mrs. Pat ever yearned for love in a cottage."

Mrs. Blint, when possible, referred to accepted favourites across the Park by their first names.

"What was the matter with Pat?" asked Buddy in the first pause.

"Pat Dyvenot?"

All eyes round the table were widened at the peculiar question.

"I thought everybody knew that," patronised Miss Blint across Mr. Hurler's complicated shirt front. "He beat her, you know."

"Beat her?" Buddy's neck began to swell and he reached into his revolver pocket, where he found that Jass had provided him with only a fresh handkerchief. So he brought the trifle out and mopped his troubled brow.

"Pat had his sympathisers too," sighed Mrs. Blint, fishing the last morsel of fruit out of her high glass.

"Did you notice—"

It was Mr. Hurler who said this, employing his finger in a throat-cutting gesture.

"You mean the pearls?" asked Mr. Blint.

Mr. Hurler nodded a beautiful nod.

"All ninety-two of them—count 'em. If I had her nerve I'd stop working to-morrow."

"Anything wrong with the pearls?" blurted the artless one from Axe Creek.

"I should say not!" Mr. Hurler was very superior. "If you take one look at 'em you can tell that."

"But how can she wear them everywhere?" asked Miss Blint. "Owfully bad taste, I call it."

"You see, Terry Overbeek gave them to her as an engagement present shortly after her divorce from Pat Dyvenot," Mr. Blint in his kindly patient voice was explaining. "They are a very famous string; they belonged to Terry's mother; and to his wife, who declined to take them with her when she left him and went home to Virginia. When Overbeek's engagement to Mrs. Pat was broken, about six months ago, everybody thought the pearls would go back with the lock of hair and the letters. Not so as you'll notice."

"Well, she came by 'em honestly," was Buddy's perverse defence. This dropping of ice upon his idealism turned all his thoughts to grey. "If she wears 'em it's her business, I suppose."

"Yes, and when Tammany Hall moves away and the New York Central tracks along the Drive are covered with lawn we'll all think nice things about everybody," satirised Mr. Hurler.

"And won't it be owfully stupid!" yawned Miss Blint.

VIII

THE snarl of shade rollers woke Buddy from his dream of a captive African princess who talked in music and ate large pearls. He squinted across the blinding shaft of light, to behold a mountain chain which a thunder god leaning from the brilliant zenith was garnering in his illimitable embrace, while cataracts roared and grumbling thunders smote his ears. Dizzy with sublimity Buddy sat up in bed, got his perspective, and saw the faithful Jass picking up his scattered evening apparel. The cataract effect was caused by Croton water rushing from the spigot into the porcelain bathtub.

"What time is it?" yawned the voyager into Babel.

"It lacks a quarter of nine, sir."

"Will you tell Florence to scramble me about nine dollars' worth of eggs and send me up the morning papers?"

Jass held out three neatly squared dailies which he had been holding under his arm.

"I took the liberty of bringing your papers, sir."

The way he said it conveyed the impression that Buddy and his ancestors had been reading these particular three dailies ever since the Norman conquest.

"Will you 'ave 'ot milk with your coffee, sir?"

"Not unless the law demands it."

"I'm sure not that, sir."

Jascomb was easing the doorknob according to the best technic when Buddy halted him with a word.

"Jass!"

"Yes, sir."

"I think this darned town's getting me. Are there dark circles under my eyes and hard lines at the corners of my mouth?"

"I wouldn't say that, sir," Jas reassured him, giving a deferential inspection. "After your tub I'm sure you'll look quite fit."

"Fit for what?"

"Just fit, sir, properly speaking."

Jass gave another turn to the knob.

"Say, Jas."

"Yes, sir."

"Is the hair beginning to grow on the back of my neck?"

While Buddy lowered his tousled head the valet rubbed a diagnostic finger along the cervical vertebræ.

"I think there's quite a tendency, sir."

"You see, I've been shaving that neck now for about thirty-four years. If I'd let it grow I suppose it would sprout whiskers down to my knee joints."

"I have no doubt, sir. To-morrow, when you have your hair trimmed again—"

"Do you mean to say that I've got to have the darned thing cut twice a week?"

"That is the rule, sir."

"Ghost of Great Henry!"

"Yes, sir."

Jascomb vanished as if to avoid Great Henry's spectral appearance.

Buddy picked up the most conservative of the three dailies. Local, national and international news swam before his eyes, which were a trifle hot and blinky that morning. The water in the bathtub began to gurgle menacingly, so Buddy got up, turned it off and got back into bed. He was just comparing the page disparagingly with the Axe Creek Republican's intimate and chatty way of saying things

about folks when an item, six inches in length and appropriately headlined, rose, so to speak, and smote him in the eye:

"Mrs. Patrick Dyvenot Loses Celebrated Pearls."

Buddy held the paper nearer to his nose and took it all in dazedly, the type pranking before his astounded blinks:

"Famous Necklace Disappears Outside Metropolitan Opera House."

The whole item was worded in the Morning Harpsichord's manner of not making much ado about anything. But the fact that it was on the front page was enough. Mrs. Dyvenot had been the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Fairmont Garland at the opera. . . . After the second act the party had left the theatre and was proceeding in Mr. Garland's car toward a supper party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mark Harbinger. . . . Mrs Dyvenot had suddenly discovered the loss of her pearls. . . . They had certainly been at her throat when she left the opera house. . . . Possibly they had fallen when she entered the car. She accused nobody. The clasp had been weak and the necklace might have been picked off the sidewalk by some Broadway pedestrian. She had notified the police and was offering a large reward.

Nervously Buddy abandoned the repressed journalism of the Harpsichord for the more fervid art of the Morning Trombone. Despite the haste with which the news must have been inserted the front page of the Trombone was emblazoned with illustrations. There was a full-length picture of Mrs. Dyvenot—obviously lifted from the society column of yesterday; also a picture of Prince Carlo Kulik with his chow dog; also one of Terry Overbeek in his hunting costume.

"Ill-fated Overbeek Gems Stolen From Neck of Mrs. Pat Dyvenot, Queen of Four Hundred. Is Scandal in High Life Hinted or Was Treasure Purloined by Society Thief?"

was the Trombone's characteristic bray. Followed a literary triumph—signed by the Trombone's hired Byron—beginning:

"Verdi's magic strains of passion, love and death, heart-throbbing through every floriation of Egypt's weird artistry, brought to Mrs. Pat Dyvenot—more mysterious than Isis and more lovely—no hint of impending calamity. Seated in Montie Garland's royal box, a genuine prince of the blood worshipping at her side, her hand strayed with loving grace up to that rope of pearls which—who knows?—may have cost her many a secret tear for the great society romance now gone forever.

"The wonderful pearls were at her throat.

"Less than a half hour later they were gone!"

Buddy leaped out of bed, tore away his new silk pyjamas, and took a reckless plunge into the tubful of freezing water. He detested cold baths, but this morning his head was ringing with a plan as ingeniously foolhardy as any he had adopted in working out the Supercyanide Process.

For in him there lay the strength of ignorance; the power of Columbus, who didn't know the world was perfectly flat, as any schoolman could have told him, and was just fool enough to mortgage his farm, buy a ship and sail into seas which, as was scientifically proved, were swarming with dragons and evil spirits. Columbus was one of your idiots who want to find out for themselves. He didn't find what he was looking for, but undoubtedly he did discover something substantial.

Of such a kidney was Buddy McNair.

As soon as he had eaten his breakfast and gotten into his freshly pressed suit he clamoured for a flower in his button-hole.

"Jass," said Buddy when the valet was in an intimate pose, pinning a gardenia to his lapel, "what's considered the champion jewelry store of New York?"

"Twillaway's, sir," responded Jass without the least hesitation.

"The best there is?"

"There are better in Paris or London, sir. But it was found most excellent by Lord Sorenham while visiting the States."

"Which states?" asked Buddy absent-mindedly.

"Any number of them, sir, I make no doubt."

"Neither do I," said the man from Axe Creek as he flourished his Malacca stick and departed on his most peculiar errand.

Twillaway's marble portico was but a short walk up the Avenue, and the man with the bright idea had scarcely permitted the doorman to swing the plate glass to his pleasure when he enjoyed a feeling that Jascomb's art in his behalf had not been in vain. For a worldly gentleman with drooping white moustachios came forward from out the vista of flashing show cases, indicated by his manner that Buddy must be somebody, and deferentially inquired into his needs. Buddy hesitated over the question of shaking hands, and at last deciding against it took the old lord into his confidence.

"Have you got any pearl necklaces for sale?" he asked point-blank.

"If you'll step this way," volunteered the ambassador, twisting his moustachios to an amiable smile, "I've no doubt we can show you something."

Past quarts of Koh-i-noors, Jagersfonteins, Cullinans,

sparkling at him from their yards of velvet; past crowns of Charlemagne, diadems of Cleopatra and a half city block of circlets, zones, tiaras, stomachers, sunbursts, cloudbursts and petrified great glaciers, flashing up at him under glass, mocking the wildest dreams of Ali Baba, Aladdin, Solomon and James Buchanan Brady—he came at last upon a region of calm pallor devoted obviously to pearls.

"The gentleman wishes to look at some pearl necklaces," his noble conductor informed a no less noble person behind the counter.

"About what size of pearl would you like to see?" asked the salesman, deferentially regarding Buddy's new gardenia.

"Do you sell 'em by the pearl or by the rope?" was the customer's natural question.

"We usually make them up according to your selection," smiled the salesman impassively. He was quite bald, and Buddy, considering a large mole near the crown of his head, thought that would be about the size, but diplomatically refrained from saying so. Buddy stood contemplating the display in the case, seeking in vain to find anything that approximated the lost Overbeek treasure.

"Here's a nice little thing," suggested the salesman, lifting a grey-velvet cushion by its corners and showing the string of modest beads coiled across its surface. "Beautifully matched five-grain white pearls. Very pretty for a young girl."

"What's the price?" asked Buddy as a feeler.

"Eleven thousand five hundred dollars," said he, as though apologising at the mention of such a trifle.

"The ones I'm looking for are about the size of hard-boiled eggs. Here's the boy I'm after."

He pointed to a solitary pearl that lay unmounted on its own cushion.

"This is one of twenty grains," said the salesman, bring-

ing out the pearl. "A necklace centring in one like this and graduated down, to, say, six grains, would be quite beautiful, but very expensive. It's one, in fact, of a wonderful string that we've been taking apart and selling in various settings for one of our customers."

"Could you get together ninety-one more like it and rope 'em together for me?"

"No doubt we could." He looked over sharply at Buddy before adding: "If you wish us to imitate——"

——the Overbeek pearls?"

"I was going to say that."

"Well, that's the very idea. The lady I'm buying these for has got her heart set on having a string like Mrs. Dyvenot's; she doesn't care if they hang her, but she's got to have 'em. I thought you could do the job if anybody could."

The salesman fixed his keen eyes on Buddy for full half a minute before he spoke.

"Yes, you've certainly come to the right place," he admitted at last: "The Overbeek necklace was assembled by Twillaway's, you know."

"I'm in a hurry," urged Buddy, quite truthfully this time. "How long do you think it'll take to get them together?"

"Just a moment."

The salesman disappeared into the recesses of the shop and came back presently with a heavy graduated string of cream colored pearls laid over his two hands.

"This is a fragment of a very valuable necklace," he said. "The one in the show case was the centre pearl of that same string. We have only thirty-three in all—but you'll admit that as far as they go they are exact replicas of the Overbeeks."

"As alike as the Hogan family!" cried Buddy, delighted so far with his adventure.

"They were made up for a customer who—like the lady you mention—was determined to have a string as similar as possible to Mrs. Dyvenot's. We think we can lay our hands on several others from this set if you care for it."

It was as easy as buying a quart of beans—so the excellent salesman made it appear.

"I leave it to you," were Buddy's fatal words. "I'm not worrying about the price, but I want action and I want the whole thing to look like Mrs. Dyvenot's."

"You will notice the clasp," insinuated the bald-headed one.

It was a shallow-cut white diamond in a daisy-shape filigree, as closely resembling the jewel he had seen at the nape of Mrs. Dyvenot's queenly neck as one Hogan resembled another Hogan.

"Could you have them strung, say, by three o'clock?" asked the eager purchaser.

"I'm afraid that would be hurrying matters a trifle. We'd have to send out among the brokers and importers for such valuable gems as these; and several are missing."

"Well, then?"

"Early to-morrow afternoon at the latest. Let me have your telephone number, Mr.—"

"McNair. Gilbert Kernochan McNair, Room 1196, Hotel Merlinbilt."

"Thank you, Mr. McNair. We'll notify you—possibly before noon to-morrow."

As easy as that! Anything is possible in Bagdad, if you are a visiting prince. Buddy McNair whistled softly through his teeth and stepped over rainbows on his way back to the hotel. Almost there, he lingered at a shoe shop and bought himself a pair of pearl-gray spats to match his new suit. He bought these through the Merlinbilt's exclusive

lobby he took the elevator to the eleventh floor and swam toward his room, uplifted by dreams of conquering New York society, as Jack did the giant, by one keen stroke upon the place where beads are worn by those who cannot afford pearls.

He had no sooner gained the quietude of his white panelled suite than he tuned himself up, as it were, for the second movement in his symphony of benevolent deception. There stood a telephone on the pistachio-green desk by the window and beside it were a half dozen unopened letters, which Buddy quite disregarded in his present exaltation. He snatched out for the vellum-bound telephone book, fearful that his courage would fail before he got the number. Along the D's from Da to Do he dragged his eager finger. Sure enough, there it lay: "Mrs. Patrick Dyvenot."

He shouted the number down to the operator and could have torn away the instrument, so savage was his impatience to have it over with.

"Hello?" came a smooth inquiry at last.

"Is Mrs. Dyvenot at home?" He tried to clear his dry throat.

"This is Mrs. Dyvenot."

So soon? It was horrible. He had expected a world of complications and palaver. Instead, right bang out of nowhere, this was Mrs. Dyvenot.

"Hello?" rang out the sweet, persistent note again, inquiringly this time.

"Mrs. Dyvenot," began Buddy, plunging rapidly through the waters he had brought about himself, "my name's Zikel-fritz—J. C. Zikelfritz. I'm in the detective business."

"Yes?" It was like the caress of an icy hand.

"I read about your pearls in the papers this morning and I've gone out on my own hook to hunt them down. I—I think I've got a clew."

"On whose behalf are you working, Mr. Zikelfritz?" came the cool sweet tinkle from the other end.

"There's a gentleman—I'm pledged not to tell his name—he's been interested in the case—"

"Indeed!"

Buddy had reckoned without her mood. His dream had prepared him for a gush of gratitude or at least a coo of interest at this point.

"And we're working on a clew—and we're pretty sure we can find them for you—and if it's convenient to-morrow—"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Zikelfritz, that you and your employer will have your trouble for nothing."

"Honestly, we're on the track, Mrs. Dyvenot." Then a guilty suspicion came upon him. "You don't mean to say you've found them already?"

"No, I haven't found them," said Mrs. Dyvenot distinctly. "But I rather think you're troubling yourselves unduly on my behalf."

"But, Mrs. Dyvenot—"

He was speaking into empty space, for the lady had evidently hung up.

Here indeed was a poor development to his romantic theme. On the impulse of his inspiration he had marched over to the biggest jewelry store in the world and ordered her a quart of pearls the size of hickory nuts, to be told that he was troubling himself unduly!

Buddy was on the point of calling up Twillaways' and countermanaging the order, when his eyes again rested upon the pile of letters by the telephone. Chesterfield & Chesterfield must have turned him over to the commercial spies for there were several letters from various enterprises requesting his distinguished patronage. A firm of fashionat auctioneers requested his presence at an auction of Chin

birdcages; Madame Bobinette besought him in flowery terms to drop in and look over her spring display of boudoir caps; he was most worshipfully offered an opportunity to become a paying life patron of the Manhattan Eye and Ear Infirmary for Cats.

At the bottom of the pile was a square envelope of portentous size, but this he neglected for a businesslike envelope bearing the letterhead of the Virginia Gold Reduction Company and addressed in Doc Naylor's familiar scrawl. It was brief:

"Dear Buddy: Have received your check, which I am turning over to the Axe Creek Poorhouse in anticipation of your early return. From the tone of your note I gather that the mysterious stingorita was a fast enough worker; but you will find the real talent east of Salt Lake City. All well here except Shaggy Keenan, who has sobered up and realised that Colorado is a dry state. Wire when you need me.
Doc."

This was one of Doc Naylor's wholesome kicks, which reacted on Buddy in the form of heartfelt oaths and made him feel better and more human than he had since his arrival at the Grand Central Station—ages ago, it seemed. So generous was the glow, in fact, that it was some time before he had turned his attention to the large square envelope which gave every appearance of concealing another polite appeal. Indeed it was polite enough, as it proved when he broke the seal and read from the elaborately engraved card with its complicated crest at the corner:

“—Fifth Avenue

“Mr. Terrill Overbeek requests the pleasure of Mr. McNair's company at a grand supper and ball on the evening of Thursday, January eleventh, at ten o'clock.

“Dancing.”

The invitation was engraved in a large pompous script, but the words italicised in this version were, on Buddy's invitation, filled in with greenish ink.

"Dancing!" This was the word that stood out most significantly, most overpoweringly. It caused him almost to forget how grateful he should be to Terry Overbeek for remembering him so soon and so flatteringly.

But it was nice and square of Terry—no getting round that fact. The formal square card had a good effect on his spirit, gave him a new faith in the impulses of mankind. In his nervous but exalted contemplation of the summons he embraced all his fellow men and women in a spirit of forgiveness. He forgave Mrs. Dyvenot her coolness, he forgave Middleton Knox his snake-like manner of boot-licking, forgave Doris Blint her porcelain complexion—he even forgave the living corpse who had snubbed him at the Overbeek door; for it was now evident that the faithful seneschal had informed his master that Buddy McNair was in town and very lonesome.

Terry Overbeek was a friend indeed! Here Buddy had been less than a week in Terry's town and Terry had wasted not a moment in making good his promise to favour his old acquaintance.

Thursday, January the eleventh. . . . Great Henry! This was the eleventh!

Buddy gave another superstitious glance at the beautiful card. Dancing! . . . Buddy's knowledge of the art was limited to local festivals at Axe Creek's Masonic Hall, where he had been rated as a perpetual beginner and tolerated in one-two, one-two exercises under the angular embraces of visiting schoolma'ams. If he had been looked upon as a perpetual beginner in Axe Creek how would he be received in New York, hardened to the midnight acrobatics of the Insomnia Roof?

Anyhow, it was wonderful of Terry Overbeek, and upon

that great man's protecting kindness he leaned in spirit. Maybe Mrs. Dyvenot had patched up her quarrel with Terry and would be among those present. Possibly Knox would be there, too, a witness to the great Overbeek leading a perfectly dressed Buddy into the grand ballroom with the purpose of introducing him all round.

Buddy began a new set of calculations. It was now after one o'clock. First of all, he rang up the office and asked for Jascomb. An ensuing rap on the door revealed another valet, this time a rat-faced Hungarian who spoke English whiningly.

"Where's Jascomb?" asked Buddy shortly.

"He's gone for the day, sir."

"Just on the eve of the big fight—and gone for the day. He's a hell of a family retainer!"

"He gave you to me for the evening, sir."

"Now that's generous. Well, I want you to be on hand at seven o'clock prepared to trim me up like King Solomon going to the annual Sheba ball."

"Very good, sir."

After gobbling a meaty mixture in the grill Buddy hastened forth to settle the one difficult item on the card, namely, dancing.

He had seen in more or less dismal windows along Thirty-fourth Street placards announcing the willingness of skilled dancing instructors to perform miracles in ten lessons. There was scarcely time for the whole course.

On a stairway leading over a furrier's near the Elevated he discovered a sign which suited his whim:

**"FLORIDORA STEIN
ELEGANT MODERN AND FANCY
DANCING
TAUGHT IN TEN LESSONS"**

There was a peculiar hall at the top of the stairs, lit by a jumbojawed gas burner. Pieces of obese upholstery, disembowelled and shedding their entrails, loomed through the dimness. Behind a pair of oval-topped dirty-white doors a wheezy phonograph could be heard blasting away at In the Night, in the Night. The place smelled like a cellarful of sprouting potatoes.

Through a pair of dust coloured portières a stout lady in a coquettish hat plunged forth and raised the parrot call: "Something I can do for you?"

"I wanted to learn to dance," said Buddy, doffing his fashionable hat.

"Fine exercise," piped the stout one, a smile rippling down her series of chins. Then without turning her head she opened her little gash of a mouth and squawked, "Oh, Flossie!"

The phonograph was strangled into silence. The oval doors unclasped at the centre and a hawk faced virgin with tremendous eyebrows and a look of powerful determination thrust out her head.

"Gentleman to take a lesson," proclaimed the fat one.

"He'll have to wait about two minutes till Mr. Umber is through," replied the determined face quite impersonally.

"Won't you have something to read?" asked the amiable lady in the small hat. She handed him over a crumpled paper, which was merely a patch of greyish white in the surrounding twilight. Beyond the oval doors he could hear the scuffling sound of modern dancing, punctuated by a curious bump-bumping noise, suggesting violence. Could it be that Madame Floridora tunked her victim's head against the floor in the sacred cause of art?

Presently, the doors swung wide, partly revealing the mystery. A one-legged man, walking with a crutch, came

limping forth, followed by Madame Floridora, conveniently short skirts dangling above her heavy ankles.

"Monday at three, then, Mr. Umber," said she decisively; and before the lame man had gotten well down the stairs she had turned to Buddy with the explanation:

"Such courage I have seldom seen. Fox trot, one-step, tango with latest variations, all on a crutch."

"I've come to the right place!" cried Buddy, enraptured.

"Want to take by the course or by the hour?"

"By the hour and as quick as the law will let you."

She turned up the gas and looked him over with inexorable criticism. Evidently she was considering his financial rating.

"Two dollars an hour," she decreed sternly.

"Take me on for four hours," said Buddy; "and for God's sake hurry up!"

IX

AT FOURTEEN minutes of eleven that evening Buddy McNair, the tightest possible mould of form, stood under the marquee before the Merlinbilt and languidly drew a white glove over the knuckles of his left hand. To all outward seeming he was a chronic habitué of exclusive midnight revels. Under an elbow of his fur-lined overcoat he carried a gold-headed stick which the faithless Jass had recommended for evening wear; you could see your reflection in his newly ironed hat, and just as brilliantly shone his dancing shoes. When the carriage man had whistled up a taxicab Buddy had the satisfaction of knowing that he was correctly late. Outwardly the gods smiled.

But behind the mask sour visaged Doubt was lurking with her disagreeable questions. His bones ached from the four hours of continuous dancing lesson which had sent Madame Floridora to bed in a state of collapse. He had quit her classroom fairly satisfied that he could do a plain one-step, provided the tune didn't go too fast. The madame might be able to teach capable cripples modern dancing in ten lessons, but Buddy would be eternally condemned if four of them swallowed all at once, like an overdose of medicine, had untangled the secrets of the tango for him. As to the fox trot . . . you do a sashay to the right for a while, a come-on-lady-back-and-forth about six beats—or is it eight? —then you shove her round with a dignified step like an alderman pushing a wheelbarrow—— And then what? How does the lady know what you're going to do next? Agonis-

ing thought! Is there some sort of secret signal you give her to notify her of your intention to try another step and vary the monotony? Buddy had never thought to ask Madame Flossie about that point. She was a pretty capable girl.

He was making his feet go over a phantom dancing floor and whistling *In the Night* through his teeth when the taxi stopped in front of Overbeek's Gothic palace. Buddy almost fainted as he alighted with the thought: Suppose Mrs. Dyvenot should expect him to dance?

To all appearances the Overbeek house was as deserted as it had been on the day of his visit. The same drabbish curtains were pulled behind all the broad paned windows on the lower floors, giving the place an extra desolate appearance under the pallid blaze of the street lamps. The sight thrilled the intended guest with a sort of superstitious awe. Was this New York hospitality, cordially to invite one to a house darkened and shaded as against an expected air raid?

In his inquisitive mood he walked across the Avenue and gave himself a more comprehensive view of the proud dwelling. The sight renewed his spirit. A curtain, half drawn, on the fourth floor, revealed bright lights shining forth; many shadows moved within. At the same moment he saw an automobile stop at the curb, two ladies and a gentleman get out and proceed up the broad stone steps. They lingered only an instant by the bell, then the iron grille seemed to open a crack and to swallow them suddenly.

There was something mediæval, mysterious, conspiratorial about the whole affair.

Buddy McNair braced himself by a brisk walk round the block; and when he had completed the rectangle he went rather dashingly up the steps and rang the bell above

the little snarling lions. His heart stood still as the great iron grille opened a crack.

"Come in!" demanded a voice.

The guest obeyed. Once inside the splendid vestibule he was confronted by a stern faced servant in a somewhat ill-fitting dress suit, whose first inquiry was none too welcoming:

"Show your card, please."

Buddy fumbled for the invitation, which some kind fate had prompted him to carry. After a moment of inspection the strange sentinel beckoned:

"This way, please."

Buddy followed and stood blinking in the huge hall, where from a ceiling vaulted like a church a gigantic candelabrum, employing its thousand crystal facets, shed light on winding marble balustrades, tapestries woven into shapes of heroic combat, a vast carved mantel of stone reaching almost to the rafters.

"This way, please," commanded another individual, whose loose-fitting dress suit and criminal countenance lent a certain comedy touch to the baronial surroundings. Buddy, who had been hoping to catch sight of Mr. Overbeek himself, followed dazedly through a maze of corridors toward some far-off cloakroom. Somewhere from the region of high balconies he could hear strains of festal music. Just as he was rounding a complex system of pillars in his progress toward a pinkish apartment where servants could be seen stowing away fur-lined coats and silk hats his toe rapped painfully against some hard object on the floor which gave forth the ghastly sound of a skull smitten by a grave digger's spade.

Buddy recovered his balance and looking down beheld a sleek brown bearskin stretched proudly where all could see. Recognition was immediate. There lay the remains

of poor Romeo, tanned to a nicety, lined with expensive wool, glass eyes glaring with a savagery that Romeo had never displayed—save once—in all his peace-loving career. The long sharp snout was yawning to a fiery red snarl. Altogether his old-time friend presented to Buddy a ghostly and pathetic appearance.

"Poor Romeo!" elegised the man from Axe Creek, patting the hairy head. "You got into society, even if you died doing it."

"What was that?" asked the criminal-faced flunkey.

"Lead on!" said Buddy.

As soon as he had divested himself of his hat and over-coat he started back alone over the uncharted course and got himself lost in a maze of back stairways where he encountered two maids and a scrub lady whom, had it been in any less dignified surroundings, he would have suspected of having been drinking. They were standing all in a knot, and the scrub lady, who had a rosy, merry face, was carolling "I'm off for Philadelphia in the marnin'."

"Excuse me," said Buddy, coming unexpectedly upon them, "I'm lost."

"Bless his heart, he's lost!" exclaimed the merry scrub lady.

"And he's come to the party!" giggled one of the maids.

"Turn around where ye stand and take the first hall but wan afther ye pass the stairs," commanded the scrub lady, becoming suddenly dignified.

Buddy thanked them and retraced his steps, permitting the adventures in Philadelphia to be resumed amid cadenced giggles.

At last he came back to the great lobby and was again met by the hard-faced guide, who directed him toward an elevator, and this he entered with a half a dozen other ladies and gentlemen, newly arrived like himself.

The upper floor upon which they were released was very grand indeed. Palms were waving, pictured gods and goddesses were capering on the gilded cornices, and music belched forth over a million dollars' worth of Louis XIV furniture. Buddy saw distantly a tall rose-lined room, at the door of which stood some sort of reception committee busily shaking hands. Another dress-suited functionary took him in charge.

"Name, please?"

"McNair," quavered Buddy, stage fright resuming its sway.

"Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt?" asked the ruthless inquisitor.

"That's where I come from," acknowledged the stranger in town, marvelling at this custom which associated a man with his hotel, just as in mediæval times they used to shout John of Gaunt or Henry of Navarre when a gentleman went calling.

"Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt!" bawled the man at the door of the pink lined room, wherein numerous ladies, splendidly arrayed, circulated on the arms of their escorts in and out of the ballroom beyond.

A solid little man with the complexion of a ripe pippin and shrewd piggy eyes stood at the doorway shaking hands, apparently doing the honours of a host. The gaunt lady whose elaborately curled and powdered coiffure sparkled with brilliant stones was also shaking hands with all who passed. The now thoroughly confused Buddy submitted to the ceremony and acknowledged to himself that if this were Axe Creek he would be justified in believing that the elderly couple at the door were giving the party.

"You haven't met my wife," said the pippin cheeked gentleman with rather a grandiose flourish toward the high coiffure. "Mrs. Sweeny, Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt.

You haven't been long in town, sir. Martha, won't you introduce Mr. McNair to—er"—he threw out his little cock-robin chest—"a few of our guests?"

Everything was so tremendously stiff and formal that it was some time before Buddy could find a polite opportunity to ask the question that was now burning in the back of his head: Where was Terry Overbeek all this time?

"Mr. McNair, you must meet my daughter," his conventional hostess was saying in her measured tones. "This is her coming-out party—but of course you've been told. Louise!" she called to a baby-faced blonde who, a shower of expensive silver lace, left her group and came over. "Permit me to introduce Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt."

"How do you do?"

She held out her little gloved hand and regarded him with round blue eyes like glowing saucers.

"Louise, introduce Mr. McNair."

"We're ever so glad you've come," chirped Miss Sweeny in the same formal official tones as her mother and father had used. "We had to notify you at the last moment, because you arrived so recently."

"I'm stranger than a young horned toad," said Buddy politely, "and I'm ever so much obliged to you."

He was sorry he had spoken so sketchily to this pampered débutante, who gave him a glance of disapproval. All this time he was working up courage to put his question.

On the threshold of the ballroom he was fain to look across those leagues of shining floor over which wealth and fashion capered rather stiffly, as though fearful of committing some breach of the prevailing decorum. Festival lanterns—weighing something over a ton each, he computed—blazed from a golden ceiling shining upon a broad fresco of languid goddesses disporting among

Hesperian flowers. Buddy was fearfully scared that some one would want him to dance. The orchestra was dis coursing a slow exotic waltz at the moment. He wished they would strike up In the Night and give him a chance at something he knew.

"Miss Carter, Mrs. Osterlitz, Miss O'Brien—Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt," chimed the obliging Louise in a most arrogant drawl as she presented to him two heiresses and a young matron who stood at the threshold, white gloves crossed, aigrets bobbing slightly, as they conversed in tones far more affected than any he had heard in Mr. Blint's apartment.

"It's a nice party," suggested Buddy, quite panic-stricken when Miss Sweeny abandoned him to the three.

It was Mrs. Osterlitz, a handsome young matron with auburn hair and a gown of white and gold who deigned a reply, after surveying him haughtily.

"You think so." She didn't ask a question. She was merely telling him.

"We were speaking," volunteered Miss Carter, who was comely in the manner of a statue done in strawberry ice, "of the theatre."

"There's an awful lot of it," suggested Buddy, thankful for something to say.

"We were speaking particularly of the moving pictures," resumed Mrs. Osterlitz, folding an expensive fan across her breast and employing something of the wonderfully spaced modulations that seemed to prevail here.

"We were agreeing," upspoke Miss O'Brien, stiffly dimpled in her salmon coloured gown, "that the influence is very injurious to the common people."

She gave the words "common people" the note of a Juggernaut passing over ants.

"So many of our plays to-day are improper," added

Mrs. Osterlitz, who had now unfolded her fan and was swaying it with a stiff movement of the wrist—"especially for the common people."

"I think they're horrid," agreed Miss O'Brien.

"As I often say to Mr. Osterlitz," the lady with the fan continued in her throaty tones, "we cannot afford to permit our loved ones to witness that of which we ourselves do not approve."

"I guess our loved ones wouldn't have much fun if that law went into effect," broke in Buddy, who was beginning to think that the Four Hundred were having a very poor time.

"Have you seen *The Orphan Waif?*" asked Miss Carter, employing her throat-tones.

"You see, I've just come to town and——"

"It is a very interesting dramatic play," Mrs. Osterlitz measured off the decree, "but the moral lesson taught is very inferior."

"Nothing is moral any more, like the best works of Shakspere," was the criticism of Miss Carter as she tossed her pretty head, all encircled with icy stones.

What was the matter with these women? They were lovely to look at, yet they stood there like automata talking like phonographs.

At that moment a distinguished gentleman with an English accent came forth and claimed Mrs. Osterlitz for the dance.

"Mr. Nudds—Miss Carter, Miss O'Brien—and Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt."

"Very proud, sir, to meet so distinguished a gentleman," said the Englishman, ceremoniously advancing a glove.

"No prouder than I am," chimed Buddy quite truthfully; for there was everywhere a tendency to fête him, which, though confusing, had an effect of intoxication.

A scrawny foreign ambassador wearing his decorations boldly across his shirt front approached Miss Carter and bent to kiss her hand.

"Ah, mad'moiselle!" Buddy, when he got over the shock, studied the catlike hairs sticking out from under his nose in all directions. "Could I be permitted the *plaisir*?"

"You are very courteous, I am sure—and, Mr. Ambrose, permit me to present Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt."

"Ah—m'sieur!" Buddy snatched away his feverishly grasped hand, for fear the kissing ceremony might be repeated there. "Since you arrive here I have been—what you call—tickled dead to see so famous man!"

"Thanks, friend," grunted Buddy. This was almost too much.

A moment later Mrs. Osterlitz and Miss Carter were being whirled away, their chosen cavaliers embracing them in the stark, stiff manner which everywhere prevailed. Yes, it was certain that society enjoyed itself sadly.

"So you're Mr. McNair of the Merlinbilt!" said Miss O'Brien, who had been left on his hands. She gave him the full benefit of her Celtic eyes.

"I don't own the place," Buddy defended himself.

"Oh, but you are a great credit to the establishment, I am sure," she reassured him, remembering herself and quickly coming back to the phonographic style.

"If they'd only play a fox trot I'd ask you to dance," he floundered, now aware that something was expected of him.

"They are playing one now," she replied haughtily.

"Oh, are they?"

He gave ear to the orchestra and recognised something that remotely resembled In the Night.

"Well"—he took a long breath and faced her squarely—"will you?"

"I should be pleased."

She fell discreetly into his embrace, and the next he knew he was rolling her backward like a lady on castors. This was the walk step which Madame Flossie had so painstakingly taught him. Struggling to invent some expedient whereby to warn her of an impending variation he continued to roll her along for the entire length of the room. At last when the serene movement threatened to roll her into the orchestra he realised that something must be done. He looked into her eyes and saw that she was frowning.

"Now!" said Buddy and swung her mightily to the left. In the confusion of the altered movement he was aware that his heel had come down on something soft.

"Ouch!" She said it as humanly as you or I might, and stooped to nurse a battered toe.

"Honest, Miss O'Brien, this is too much for me." He stood limply, regarding the agony of the wrecked heiress.

"Too much for you!" she exclaimed, fires flashing from her Celtic eyes. And she abandoned him in the middle of the floor.

This was of course a fearful setback to Buddy's evening, which had up to now glided along with suspicious smoothness. He slunk away to the side lines, and regarding the scene with less favourable eyes was more than ever sure that the inner circle of New York society didn't know how to have a good time.

Then the prevailing mystery, which he had forgotten in the madness of the dance, came back to him. What was Terry Overbeek doing with himself? He wandered about, looking in all the stiffly posing groups of men and women,

for a friendly soul who would descend to his level, if even for a moment, and explain things.

At last he spied the distinguished diplomat, Mr. Ambrose, leaning over a golden chair in a far corner. The object of the Frenchman's enchanted regard was a wonderful figure of a young woman who, to the not obtuse Buddy McNair, looked easily the belle of the ball. She seemed far more to the purple born than did the other ladies of fashion whom he had met and danced upon during his few minutes in society. Her eyes called you, while her mouth disdained. She was graceful, almost snaky in her proportions, and she wore a shimmering gown of a peculiar golden green; there was a brilliant golden girdle round her waist, and at her shoulders slender straps of gold. Her hair, which was black as a blackbird's breast, was adorned with a curious ornament of jewels—a bandeau of emeralds which ran from the smooth straight part above her forehead to meet mysteriously somewhere behind her ears. Her jewels, her gown, her manner were all distinctive.

Perhaps poor Buddy was a trifle daft on the subject of jewels that week. At any rate he found himself calling her The Marquise and permitting her momentarily to banish the image of the woman for whom he had ordered a quart of egg-size pearls.

The Marquise and Monsieur Ambrose were ripping away at each other in French. She was apparently a person of some importance, for Mr. Ambrose was making before her more than the obeisance which the male ordinarily pays to feminine beauty.

She looked up, and upon Buddy cast her misbehaving eyes. Mr. Ambrose glanced round upon the same impulse.

"Ah, M'sieur McNair!" He extended an expressive hand and summoned the man from Axe Creek. "Mad'moiselle



"WHAT ARE THESE OVERBEEKS? MERE UPSTARTS.
MERE NEW-COMING PEOPLE. WHERE DID THEY
MAKE TOO MUCH MONEY? SOME VULGARIAN STOLE
A RAILROAD. V'LAI! THAT IS AMERICA."



de Florienne, I present Monsieur McNair of the Merlin-bilt."

"Charmed, I am sure!"

A small gloved hand went out from the splendid green costume and she gave him the full lure of her almond-shaped eyes.

"M'sieur McNair can tell so much of his important work," smiled the French ambassador, and made Buddy very happy by bowing himself away.

"I am so glad you are not dancing," said she, glancing contemptuously round the room as she indicated the empty chair next hers. Her slightly Latin accent with the rich quality of its 'r's had a warming influence upon his blood. He was entranced to occupy a chair beside this naughty, tempting marquise, who had made it so plain that she wished to talk with him alone.

"If you were any gladder than I am you'd dance with joy; in that case I'd dance with you; and that wouldn't be safe for either of us," was the complicated reasoning which brought Buddy to the empty chair.

"*Flatteur!*" she chided, rolling her mysterious eyes round at him. Then just as quickly she pursed her disdainful lips and inquired: "Why should you waste your time with this *canaille*?"

"I thought they were rather hot stuff," Buddy admitted. "It's only I who don't make good."

"Oh, là-là-là-là-là . . ." She did this for quite a while, and when she got through she smiled again and explained: "What are these Overbeeks? Mere upstarts. Mere new-coming people."

"They've been in New York some time, haven't they?" asked Buddy, rather offended at this smirch upon Terry's family name.

"What you call some time? Fifty, seventy-five years

perhaps. *Bourgeoisie!* Where did they make too much money? Some vulgarian stole a railroad. *V'là!* That is America."

"America isn't such a desert waste, take it full length."

"*Mais non!*" She dropped her tired lids. "Some very good families in New York. We know them all. We are among them. We have our ancestry with pictures before the Revolution—and not bought from picture stores. What means all this Fontainbleau?" She swept a satiric hand toward the sporting goddesses on the fresco. "The impudence of *nouveaux riches!*"

"You don't mean to tell me!"

"They make up by decoration what they lack in other things. They come from nowhere. We have blood, m'sieur, and need not announce it with flambeaux." She sighed.

"I seldom come here," she said. "There is 'too much of worth while to waste life with Overbeeks."

"Say, while you're about it, you might tell me something," blurted Buddy, determined to know the truth.

She gave him an interrogative look out of her Egyptian eyes.

"While all this party's going on, where's Terry Overbeek?"

The shrug she executed conveyed the impression that she was made of flexible rubber and about to writhe out of her beautiful green gown.

"Where he is could be nothing to us," she replied languidly.

"But I thought I might see him round somewhere," Buddy persisted.

"*Ca ne fait rien,*" said she.

Apparently that meant something, but Buddy had no intention of studying French and dancing all in one day.

"But tell me more about yourself!" she invited in one of her alluring gurgles as she leaned over and played upon his every heart-string.

"There isn't much to tell," Buddy faltered. "I'm here because I'm here; that's about all there is to say."

"The modesty of genius!" she twitted deliciously. "Man of your wonderful *noblesse*, power of Napoleon! And yet you merely say you are here because you come. All New York talks of you already, Monsieur!"

"What—me?" interrogated Buddy, forgetting rules, everything, in the depths of his amazement.

"*Certainement!* Nowhere I go but I hear how Monsieur McNair has done this, that—how he has brought new style into this barbarian city."

"But marquise—excuse me—Miss de Florienne"—the weight of celebrity caused him to flounder—"I've only been here a few days."

"What is number of days to great brain?" she asked, adoring him with her eyes. "Did not Bonaparte make himself *l'Empereur* in so much time?"

Buddy hadn't a good answer ready for that. It was certain he was beginning to like the marquise more than ever.

"Well, if I've made such a big-league hit," he mildly defended, "New York hasn't choked me to death with invitations—up to to-night."

"Ah, but recall your position!" she pointed out with an uplooking glance, as though he had already taken his place among the constellations.

Her hair brushed his cheeks as she leaned down—she was a little taller than he—and whispered: "And if you are lonesome—why should you never see me?"

Buddy McNair caught his breath.

"I haven't got your address," said he, using the most natural excuse in the world.

"That would be useless," she told him in the same mysterious tone.

"Well, I guess we can arrange it, if you name the time and the place," he found himself urging feverishly.

"Let me consider."

Her long lashes dropped romantically as she gazed down toward the point of her emerald toe. Then suddenly she glanced up, and her whole expression changed.

"There he comes again!" she almost snarled.

Threading his way through a forest of golden chairs came Monsieur Ambrose, dignified and stern.

"He has the jealousy of a cat," she whispered quickly. "Go now—and later in the evening we shall meet again."

"And you'll say where?" he reminded her.

"Yes," she hissed. "And do not fail me. I shall have need for you!"

Buddy wandered away, more dazed than ever. At the undoubted address of Mr. Terrill Overbeek he had walked into a romance of the old empire. Probably this Ambrose was a count with a passion for duelling. Visions of dusky balconies over enchanted gardens, fountains playing by moonlight, black cloaked figures meeting behind mysterious gates—followed him as far as the refreshment room.

At the broad table on which the punch bowl sat many siphons gurgled and decanters clinked upon the edges of tall glasses. Lopping generously over the seat of a small chair by the wall an enormous dowager in a spangled gown whose magenta shade matched the colour of her cheeks held a glass in one hand and made savage gestures at a young gentleman who appeared somewhat shocked at her free behaviour. Her tall aigret had slipped to one side and she was insisting upon a musical programme of her own.

"But, Mrs. Claridge, you can't sing here!" the young man was warning her.

"I can't sing anywhere, but I'm going to!" she kept on repeating in a loud voice; and burst into something about "There's a cottage in the dell."

Buddy was selfish male enough to take a highball for himself. To assemble ice, a glass, seltzer and whisky required some reaching and more vulgar shoving than he had hitherto associated with polite society. At last he stood aside with his drink and overheard an elderly stock-broker lecturing a younger one upon what apparently spelled success in Wall Street.

"You'll never get rich in a thousand years unless you take all the tips that are coming," said the grey-haired financier, to his junior's evident profit.

Buddy was sipping thirstily both of knowledge and refreshment when the approach of a handsome couple through the doorway roused at first his idle, then his more intimate curiosity. It was evident that the lady was Miss O'Brien, and by her air it was plain to see that she was more than satisfied with her escort. She was looking up into his dark eyes with a glance that conveyed an impression of respect and even more.

Buddy looked straight at the man. Of course it was merely a remarkable resemblance—who else in the world could make those deep creases in the corners of his nose when he talked? Who else could command that painfully careful cockney accent, like a perfectly trained actor in a servile part?

The couple took their places by the refreshment table, so close that Buddy could lock arms with them. And the truth couldn't be denied.

The tall, perfectly groomed young man, just then reach-

ing out for a punch glass, was Jascomb, the Merlinbilt's house valet!

Up to now Buddy had seen enough to shake his faith in the laws of gravitation, but this last spectral nonsense was too much for him. He stood blankly, then touched the masquerading servant on his outstretched arm. The effect upon Jass was equally electric. The worldly poise he had brought in with him dropped like a blanket, leaving him almost indecent in his servility.

"Jascomb!" exclaimed Buddy, actually happy to look again upon a familiar face.

"Yes, sir."

The valet rapidly smuggled the glass over to his chosen lady and approached like a whistled hound.

"What in hell are you doing here?"

"Yes, sir. Not so loudly, sir, if you don't mind. If it is not asking too much, sir, would you step outside the door? I shall be at your service in a minute, sir. Thank you, sir."

Buddy took orders from his servant with all the meekness of a sleepwalker. How long he waited outside he never knew, because the whole mad-hatter's party was swimming before his eyes. At last he saw Jascomb, now standing in the crushed-strawberry pose proper to the English valet.

"If you won't take it as an impertinence, sir, might I ask what *you* are doing here?"

"I came here——" was Buddy's idiotic reply.

"No doubt, Mr. McNair. You were invited, sir?"

Buddy fumbled into the inside pocket of his new dress suit and brought out the large engraved card. "Thank you, sir."

Jascomb examined the card a full minute before an almost human expression dawned over his wooden face.

"That's most droll, if I might say so, sir. The card, as you see, is addressed to Mr. McNair, not giving any initials, in a manner of speaking. Quite a natural error, I might call it."

"You might call it; but why was it sent to me?"

"There's a new 'ead waiter at the Merlinbilt of the same name—Mr. McNair, sir. He was 'unting for his invitation all day."

"I'm waking up," croaked Buddy. "You mean that if I'd been the head waiter Mr. Overbeek would have asked me to his ball?"

"Oh, not that, sir, I'm sure. This ball isn't being given by Mr. Overbeek—only at his 'ouse, sir."

"You mean that Sweeny out there has borrowed Terry's cabin for a dance?"

"In a manner of speaking, sir. Mr. Sweeny, I might explain, is Mr. Overbeek's caretaker. Mr. Overbeek is away a great deal, you understand, and Mr. Sweeny opens up the 'ouse once a year and gives a ball to all the upper classes—all in service, I mean to say, sir. Nobody but the best ladies and gentlemen asked, sir. Miss O'Brien—whom you may have met—is Mrs. William Baylort Winder's personal maid; Mrs. Osterlitz is 'ousekeeper to Mrs. Fairmont Garland. Nothing but the best will do for Mr. Sweeny, sir."

"Well now, there's a nerve that can't be pulled!" said Buddy in genuine admiration. "Do you mean to say they can get away with this and Terry Overbeek know nothing about it?"

"You wouldn't report it, sir?" asked Jass, visibly cow-
ering before the consequences.

"I wouldn't go back on a bunk mate," Buddy made loyal
assurance.

"If you would like to go, sir, without attracting undue attention——"

No hint to get out could be more pointed than this. It was evident that Jascomb's sense of propriety had been deeply shocked; a haunting fear of ostracism at the hands of New York's most distinguished servant society surrounded him like a cloud.

"If you'll take this little door, sir"—Jascomb was hinting ever so delicately, leading his unworthy master aside and pointing out the small, glass-inlaid exit—"you can easily find the back stairs, sir."

"Thank you, Jass."

"Thank you, sir," Jass corrected.

Buddy had retreated a step, when again he heard the respectful voice at his elbow.

"I beg pardon, sir," said Jass, "your cravat is a trifle disarranged."

And he tidied the knot to a nicety before Buddy made his escape.

But when he had walked out by that secret door he knew almost at once that he was lost in an endless maze of dark rooms and passages.

He had an idea of cutting cross-lots to the back stairs; therefore, he crept along a narrow hall, which ended, as he soon found out, in a perfectly deserted twilit room whose sparse illumination came meagrely in through an elaborate stained-glass window overlooking one end of the ballroom.

Sounds of music, shuffling feet, laughter came to him mockingly in this unpleasant cell; it gave him the clammy sensation of committing burglary and of being in danger of shameful detection.

His one instinct now was to get out. The weird little

cubby-hole of a room had the effect of turning him completely round, and he began making a tour of the walls, groping blindly for a door and cursing Jass as he groped. What right had Jass to leave him in such a mess? Perhaps the doors would be locked on him and he would be left here, a prisoner, after the party had broken up and the servants gone to bed.

He had finished his tour of three walls and come back to the stained-glass window when his shoulder collided noisily with a tall rectangular object, standing shadowy against the light. The object was some sort of folding screen apparently, for upon contact it collapsed and tumbled to the floor with a damnable crash. Out of the gloom somebody swore a good round oath. As inexplicably two strong hands shot out and seized Buddy by the collar.

"Well, what in—" began Buddy.

"I'll teach you," snarled a harsh voice, "to come stamping about my house!"

By now the instinct of self-defence had overcome astonishment. Buddy grappled, to his advantage, with his mysterious assailant. There was a short chaos, punctuated by oaths, punctured by blows. The man was taller than Buddy, but in poor condition; and when at last the Westerner had gotten a strangle hold under his opponent's chin and forced back his head he still had sufficient presence of mind to drag the writhing body toward the stained-glass window.

A shaft of light fell full upon the distorted face, purple with rage, teeth showing; and on that flash Buddy became aware that the gentleman whom he was at that moment so industriously choking was Mr. Terrill Overbeek!

Buddy let go. Mr. Overbeek, in his otterskin coat, his hat lying where it had been knocked in the scuffle, was in a kneeling posture on the floor, his suppliant attitude ill

matching the malevolent glare with which he looked up into the face of the small but knotty man, who had unsuspectingly interrupted his spying.

"Now look here, Terry," said Buddy as softly as possible in order that the best servant society in New York might not riot in and be witness to the scandal, "I didn't start it, you know."

"Who the devil are you?" asked Overbeek, getting lamely to his feet.

"Take a look," suggested Buddy, and grinned up at the man, who was an inch taller than he.

Overbeek glutted his eyesight in the dim light, and when understanding at last dawned he seemed more savage than ever.

"Buddy McNair!" he thundered. "What the devil are you doing among my pantries?"

"Easy with the voice, Terry," cautioned the man from Axe Creek. "If you holler again you're pretty liable to have the Duchess of Stewpan and the Marquis de Chauffeur in here for a royal investigation."

"Isn't this my house?" he spluttered, muffling his voice nevertheless.

"I thought so, too, Terry, when I came here. It kind of looks as though you and I had made a mistake."

The orchestra beyond had now swung into a languorous waltz. Overbeek stepped to the stained-glass window and put his eye a moment to the crack ere he tiptoed back to Buddy's side, and taking him gently by the arm whispered: "You're right, I fancy. Come on!"

With the dexterity of a river pilot he found the channel through an entirely new series of dark halls, closets, pantries, little stairways, alcoves and secret chambers. They took a short flight of stairs and came out upon a small

balcony, partly obscured in darkness and overlooking the baronial splendours of the entrance hall.

"Psst!" warned Overbeek. He got down on all fours and peered cautiously through the rails. Presently he gave a dry chuckle and beckoned to Buddy, who, imitating the Leatherstocking method of ambush, huddled close and took survey of the shining square below.

Society was passing in review here, vari-coloured groups of dowagers, heiresses, débutantes gesticulating in the stiff poses of marionettes, while all the beaux, from Nash to Brummell, bowed with exaggerated courtesy, swaggered a little, indulged in the perfumed antics of Versailles. Here the courtliness of the old empire was revived. Upon a background of priceless tapestries the exalted chivalry of New York's menial smart set suggested the strummings of Mozart to some forgotten minuet.

Occasionally rival gallants, fastidiously clad, would meet competitive over the whimsied favours of some haughty damsel. Eyes would strike fire and dangerously repressed gestures would suggest an impending challenge. The proud blood of Montmorency brooks no light words in the court of love. Possibly even now smallswords were crossed, thrusting and parrying, singing the song of death in one of the dark pantries out back of the kitchen. On a carved bench near the Gothic fireplace sat Miss O'Brien, apparently the toast of the evening, a young lord of military figure and ambrosial curls leaning ever closer, lost in contemplation of her eyes.

"As I live!" whispered Overbeek. "That's Andrew, Mrs. Van Laerens' groom!"

Again he led Buddy through circuitous passages, and at last coming upon a heavy door he plied key to lock with burglarious haste. He pulled his captive into the yawning

blackness, softly closed the door and switched on the lights. An extensive bedroom was revealed in the bleak state of unoccupancy wherein articles of furniture are wearing striped overalls and the pictures are swaddled in cheese-cloth. In the flooding brilliance Buddy could see the face of the mighty huntsman in more detail. It had grown much older since the day of Romeo's foul undoing. There were sacks under the prominent colourless eyes; the cheeks had sagged slightly; the tightly curled hair, which Buddy had remembered as black, was now pepper-and-salted with grey.

The curious smile which he was at that moment giving his unbidden guest was full of an experienced worldly humour and, somehow, terribly sad.

"Sit down, Buddy," he invited, pulling two covered chairs together.

He went over to a labyrinthine cupboard in an alcove and unlocking a small door brought out a bottle and two glasses which, after the generic habit of male housekeepers, he proceeded to wipe with his handkerchief. At this human touch Buddy's soul rushed toward him over separating æons. He measured out brandy with a somewhat shaky hand and served his guest with a share.

"Well, Buddy," said he, "when I asked you to come and see me in New York I didn't think it would be exactly like this."

"You haven't got a thing on me, Terry," smiled Buddy over his drink.

"I thought I'd seen everything——" the multimillionaire slowly sipped—"but what I've seen to-night is entirely new in my experience. I've heard of such things, but I didn't know they really happened."

"That's funny," said Buddy. "I've been here about three days, and I know anything can happen in New York."

"You haven't explained yet how you got here. This is apparently a very exclusive affair. What branch of service have you taken up?"

This was a deep sting in Buddy's most cherished vanity. "If I wanted to," he said, somewhat flushing, "I could hire every servant in your ballroom."

"Indeed!" Overbeek arched his heavy eyebrows. "Struck it rich, as they say out West?"

"Have you heard of the Supercyanide Process?" asked its inventor, trying hard not to swell out.

"Oh yes!" It was difficult to tell whether he had or hadn't. Overbeek would say anything to be polite.

"Well, I'm it."

"Congratulations, I'm sure!" It merely had the effect of making Buddy feel that he had done a lot of loud talking. "And so you've come to the great city to spend it."

"I thought of settling down here; getting me a house something like this, maybe."

"God forbid!" was Overbeek's prayer.

The brandy in the glasses was gone, and Overbeek after pointing the bottle questioningly toward Buddy gave himself a second helping.

"I'm glad you admire my house," he added at last. "But you haven't told me how you came to be here."

"That's easy enough. There's a new head waiter at the Merlinbilt named McNair. His invitation got delivered to my room, and I just naturally came. When you jumped me in the dark I was trying to escape from the marquise with the Paris-green dress."

"Probably a lady's maid." Overbeek mused. "Tell me one thing: Are they serving champagne?"

"I didn't see any. When I broke away the duchess was drinking Scotch highballs."

"That man Sweeny's pretty efficient, I see, but apparently

he hasn't found the combination to my wine cellar. By the way, what sort of an invitation card did they send you?"

"Right here," said Buddy; and plunging a somewhat soiled white glove into an inner pocket he brought out the large card.

Overbeek looked just once and laughed again.

"They've gotten into a lot of old ones—about ten years out of date—that I've had kicking round a storeroom. Nice situation!" He began to show a trace of the anger that had disfigured him in that twilight choking match.

"I've been away a great deal," he resumed, calming down. "And about three weeks ago I got tired of seeing my servants doing nothing, so I closed up Merlinmoor and sent the entire staff to open up this house, with the idea that I would be back in town late in February. Well, I'm on my way to Florida—all quite unexpected, you understand—just got into New York to-night, and decided to stop over at my own place. I caught sight of lights blazing in one of the upstairs windows—thought it must be a fire or something quite extraordinary, so I got in by a side door. And when I heard music and the sounds of revelry by night I set out to do a little detective work. There's an old pantry we haven't used since the house was remodelled; it's curious you should have stumbled into it—and mighty lucky you didn't get shot."

He brought a small automatic pistol out of his side pocket and held it in the flat of his hand.

"I know you're a dangerous man with a gun, Terry." Buddy grinned.

"Oh, you're referring to that unfortunate bear episode. Possibly I wasn't at my best that day."

"I shall always think you were pretty good."

"By the way, Buddy—you saved my life, you know."

Overbeek said this in the same accusing tone with which

he had acknowledged it that starry night as he sat in the front seat of his camp wagon.

"You're not going to be peevish about that, are you?" Buddy somewhat sheepishly inquired.

"After all it was my life"—Overbeek spoke in his customary tone of proprietorship—"and I should like to do something, you know."

If bashfulness dwells in such a man Overbeek was now battling with the virginal emotion.

"Oh, forget it!" blurted the man from Axe Creek.

"No. You can't pass over a thing like that with a word. Come now, what do you suggest?"

"Let me see." Overbeek could of course do a great deal for him. "I'll tell you what you do—as a special favour to me, forget about this party to-night. If it was me I suppose I'd shoot the whole gang; but I sort of feel implicated in the crime, and I'd hate to see them fired."

"Ho ho!" laughed Overbeek in his nervous little voice. "I haven't the remotest intention of firing them, as you say. Some of those servants my family have been training for thirty years. It rather rouses the cave man in me to see them wearing my sister-in-law's gowns and drinking out of my pet Venetian glass—but fire them? Never! The employer of servants can't be happy until he learns the Socratian code, 'What you don't know won't hurt you.' Officially I'm in Florida and my servants are all in bed, as they should be."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it."

"So you see the favour you asked wasn't a favour after all. Now what shall it be?"

Buddy hesitated on the brink of an impertinence which would not be stilled.

"Terry," he said at last, "do you think there's any way

you could fix it so that I could be introduced to Mrs. Dyvenot?"

"To whom?"

Overbeek scowled and drew down the corners of his mouth. Was he going to behave like Blint?

"To Mrs. Pat Dyvenot. I know you travel in the same crowd, and I'm a stranger in town. If I look her up all by myself I'm afraid she might think I was some sort of artist with a shell outfit."

"Alice, where art thou?" inquired Overbeek cryptically, looking skyward and laying a seal-ringed hand upon his greying curls. "Buddy, what in the world do you want of Mrs. Dyvenot?"

"Well, you see it's like this." Buddy was thinking rapidly: "I found her pearls and I want to take them back to her."

"Her pearls?"

Overbeek's face seemed to pucker all together.

"I forgot you'd been in the woods. The papers have been hollering about it ever since she lost 'em at the Metropolitan Opera House last night."

"I see." He sat solemnly regarding his neat toes; then as he looked up his lips curled slightly to a smile which was bitter and somewhat sarcastic, Buddy thought.

"You mean she lost what are called the Overbeek pearls?"

"Lost 'em in the lobby of the Metropolitan, and I picked 'em up."

"Lost 'em and you picked 'em up," he repeated over and over like a deficient child. It was diabolical. It might have implied anything. "Lost the Overbeek pearls—and you picked 'em up."

"Of course I could send 'em to her or take 'em round

myself, but I thought some kind of introduction might help."

"I haven't the remotest idea of giving you any introduction to Mrs. Dyvenot. You might as well get that out of your head," upspoke Overbeek sharply, his eyes flaming to a cold resentment.

"Well, of course, in that case——"

Buddy rose and looked round for his hat. Then he remembered having left it, together with his overcoat, somewhere among the marble halls of the first floor.

"I don't want to appear ungrateful, McNair," Overbeek was going on in that queer voice which had suddenly come upon him, "but I don't think you'll be accomplishing anything by taking back Mrs. Dyvenot's pearls."

"She'll kind of like to see them again, won't she?" asked Buddy with a touch of irony on his part.

"I'm not at all sure she will," said the strange person. Curiously, the remark seemed to match Mrs. Dyvenot's reply over the telephone.

"Well, anything the matter with 'em?" Buddy was beginning to lose patience.

"Not physically," replied Overbeek, levelling his cool glance. "Quite a valuable bit of property, I should say."

"Of course, I've given you a chance to do me that favour."

The suggestion fell flat as far as any response from Overbeek was concerned.

Buddy, his hand upon the door, had a vision of himself charging down Fifth Avenue without hat or overcoat. It was quite evident he was no longer wanted.

"Just take mine," said Overbeek carelessly, pointing to the garments he had cast aside.

With all eagerness Buddy slipped on the splendid furs and pulled the soft hat as far over his forehead as it would go.

"Thanks," he acknowledged briefly. "Do I send 'em back here in the morning?"

"In the name of heaven, no! I'm going over to the Tory Club for the night. I'll arrange for myself about clothes."

He clicked out the light and taking Buddy by the crook of the arm began leading him again through the backstairs labyrinth.

At last they came down to a modest door leading to a basement area way. Turning the lock and pointing out toward a concrete walk running round the side of the house Overbeek held out his hand.

"I'm going to remember that favour some time," said the strange host; "but the one you asked I'll have to refuse."

"Just why?"

"Because I don't think it would be doing you a favour, if you know what I mean."

And the little door closed very softly behind him.

X

T-R-R-R-R-R-R-R!

The little demon stuttered annoyingly beside Buddy's hot pillow. Broad daylight started through the cobwebs that mazed his sight. It was morning again, and again New York was in conspiracy to break his rest.

T-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!

He tore the receiver off the hook and snarled into the mouthpiece "Hello!"

"Is this Mr. Gilbert Kernochan McNair?"

"It's his remains."

"His what, please?"

"Remains. What do you want?"

"This is Mr. Shorewinkel, speaking for Twillaway's."

Buddy gave a swift glance toward the little clock on the mantel. It was a quarter after eleven.

"Yes."

"We have the pearl necklace ready for you, Mr. McNair," said the bald-headed voice.

"Oh yes."

"Shall we have it sent to your hotel for your approval or will you call?"

"I'll call."

Buddy wished the man would stop asking questions. His head ached.

"At about what time, Mr. McNair?"

"Between three o'clock."

"Thank you. We shall look for you then."

"By the way, what's the bill?"

"Let me see." A short pause. "Two hundred and twenty-five, Mr. McNair."

"Dollars?"

"No, thousands."

"Much obliged. Good-bye."

Buddy turned over and hid his face among the feverish pillows. He lay in a swoon for a space of time, and gradually coming back to life began to realise that money was only a relative thing after all. The two hundred and twenty-five, so lightly mentioned, would dent his deposit in the Broker's Trust Company, but it would come far from effecting a breach. To mix a metaphor—and Buddy's state of mind called for mixed metaphors—he had made his Rubicon, crossed it and eaten the bridges behind him.

Jascomb, more delicately crushed than ever, appeared at about noon, more sleek garments folded over his arm.

"Your morning coat, sir, from Chesterfield & Chesterfield," was the explanation.

"My mourning coat?" Buddy asked dismally.

"Morning coat, sir," corrected the discreet one, who himself showed traces of last night. "But of course with the proper cravat and gloves it would be quite correct for a funeral."

"I'll put it on," said Buddy. "But I think you might brighten up the corps with a touch of colour. Haven't we got a shamrock shirt and a red-white-and-blue necktie in stock somewhere?"

"But, for a funeral, sir—"

"After all, it's mine," said Buddy impatiently.

"Thank you, sir."

"Jass, I left my hat and overcoat at the party last night. I wish you'd send over and get 'em for me."

"I've taken the liberty, sir."

He pointed toward an easy-chair upon which, neatly ironed and folded respectively, lay his silk hat and over-coat.

"Ghost of Great Henry! When did you do that?"

"Last night, sir."

Jass was now making toward the closet where Buddy had concealed the hat and coat he had borrowed from Overbeek.

"Jass," spoke his master sharply, "I wish you'd keep out of that closet."

"Yes, sir. There's a strange 'at and coat in there, sir. Possibly you would wish to 'ave them returned when—"

"I'll take care of that."

"Yes, sir."

It was evident from the manner of the two men that last night's adventures were to be forevermore a forbidden subject between them. Buddy looked shyly over at the valet, a question about to break from his lips; and at the same moment he discovered Jass regarding him with a blush—if wood can be said to blush. Both sets of eyes fell. But Buddy had more immediate questions before him.

"Jass, what sort of duds ought a man to wear when he's going out to spend two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars all at once?"

"At what time of day, sir?"

"Half past three in the afternoon."

"A morning coat, sir, would be appropriate; unless you would be spending in a matter of business. American gentlemen are a bit careless in that respect."

"This is a matter of pleasure, Jass," said Buddy, easing himself out of bed. "And now I want you to make me look as beautiful as—as that man with the movie hair who was talking with the duchess last night."

"You mean Mrs. Van Lærens' chauffeur, sir?"

"You've caught the idea."

"Thank you, sir."

They never again ventured on forbidden ground.

XI

IT was one of those springlike days in January when skies are cloudless and the Street Cleaning Department, having little to do, is doing it well. A perfect figure of a tailor-made man Buddy McNair, appropriately top-hatted, gardenaed, morning-coated, set forth on his mission of pearls and impertinence. The world at large would have regarded it as headstrong, eccentric, wildly extravagant. Only Doc Naylor would have understood. From his superior mountain height that sage would have shaken his fat shoulders and inquired, "What are you going to do with a man who sees the evening star in the east?"

In the estimation of Jass the master's fashionable appearance was much marred by the fact that he carried an otter-collared overcoat and a soft brown hat shamelessly displayed to a critical public as he walked forth into the world. Vainly Jass expostulated that it wasn't done; but the man from Axe Creek protested that New York had not as yet crippled him to the point where he couldn't carry another man's hat. In fact Buddy had made up his mind to return Overbeek's garments to the Tory Club as a sort of nerve settler before his advance upon Mrs. Dyvenot.

At the Tory Club he was repulsed at once by the man at the door, who upon seeing that the caller had a hat and an overcoat for Mr. Overbeek haughtily commanded him to apply at the service entrance. Buddy found himself appealing at a small door under the stairs; and when he heard a harsh voice distantly bawling "Valet with Mr. Overbeek's

coat!" he took matters in his own hands, pitched the garments over a chair and took to his heels.

If this reception had a dampening effect upon his vanity, the spot was soon dried out under the sunlight of approval which he brought upon himself at the Brokers' Trust Company when he stepped to the teller's window just before closing time and modestly requested that his check for two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars be immediately certified. The transaction gave him a feeling of omnipotence. We never feel so wealthy as when we are throwing our wealth away.

It was nearing half past three when Gilbert Kernochan McNair, looking the distinguished part he was about to play in New York's secret diplomacy, arrived at Twill-away's.

Mr. Shorewinkel was apparently impressed, for he accepted the certified check after only the slightest delay behind the scenes. Presently he brought forth a box covered with watered silk and almost the size of a steamer trunk. Impressively he raised the lid and revealed a duplicate of the Overbeek necklace, nicely looped in two strands round a large hummock of white velvet artfully moulded to resemble a cross section from the neck of a perfect lady. No connoisseur of jewels, but an experienced worker in fine metals, Buddy could not restrain a gasp at the shimmering beauty of that treasure.

There was something clandestine in the bald-headed salesman's manner as with a gold-pointed pencil he touched every shining globe in the perfectly matched string.

"The centre," he explained, looking swiftly round him as though suspecting spies concealed under all the counters, "is the twenty-grain pearl we showed you yesterday. We've graduated them down to the six-grain row at the back. In many ways I think we've obtained a better result than in

the original Overbeek. There are ninety-two, as you'll see."

Daintily the golden point tipped each pearl—eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two. Mr. Shorewinkel counted with a slight lisp.

"And I think you'll find the duplicate rather remarkably successful, Mr. McNair."

"You mean it's just like the one Mrs. Dyvenot lost?"

"As near as the jeweler's art can make it."

"That's good!" He snatched out for the prize, because Mr. Shorewinkel was about to loop it back over the velvet neck.

"Just hand it to me," commanded Buddy, trying with all his might to appear calm.

And as soon as an end of the glistening string was in his glove he twisted it into a great snarl and forced it, coil after coil, into an inner pocket of his morning coat.

"But, Mr. McNair!" suggested Mr. Shorewinkel, his bald top pinking with an inward effort to retain his professional manner, "we could send it round in the box—or—any way you wished."

"Well, this is the way I wish," said Buddy, patting the bulge in his side. "But I'm just as much obliged to you."

He had a feeling that all Twillaway's establishment was looking at him as he walked out of the place. But a glance round revealed nothing more curious than dozens of busy salesmen displaying quarts of crown jewels to ladies in sables. What was two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars to Twillaway's anyhow? This thought at once consoled and disturbed him. That was the baffling thing about New York. What was two hundred and twenty-five thousand, or two hundred and twenty-five million, for the matter of that? There was always a mill to grind it up. And Buddy McNair had sold his share in the Virginia

mill for a little more than he had paid for the ornament he was now carrying in his inside pocket!

He found Mrs. Dyvenot's address to be one of those smart brownish-brick apartment houses just off Madison Avenue in the lower Seventies. In architectural splendour or ceremonious approach the lobby into which he walked in no way matched the Blint's house on Riverside Drive. The space was small, in fact; just room enough for a neutral-tinted rug. A few articles of carved furniture stood against walls of flat greyish stone. A deferential man in a modest uniform came forward to ask if Mrs. Dyvenot expected him.

"Here's my card," said Buddy with more promptness than was his habit in such matters. "Tell her I'm the man who fixed that detective business and that I've come with the goods."

"Yes, sir."

Like another Jass the man bowed and disappeared. Presently he came back and said, "Won't you come up, sir?"

An elevator had appeared mysteriously out of a niche in the stone wall. Buddy was terribly calm now—calm with the spirit of a warrior who is at last under the enemy's fire. The expensively quiet elevator took him up four floors; he longed in vain for a few of the Blintish mirrors in which to review himself before the moment of action. The operator waved him toward a door at the right of the small landing. Buddy rang the bell and rested gracefully upon his stick.

A young woman in a grey uniform and frilled cap at last opened the door. There were no broad vistas beyond. The entrance into which she motioned him was small.

"Is Mrs. Dyvenot at home?" asked Buddy in the smoothest tone he knew.

"May I have your card, sir?" was her immediate counter question.

The young woman vanished, leaving Buddy to stand lonesomely in the tiny entrance. There was a smallish room beyond, full of Chinese bric-à-brac and embroidered pillows. The narrow walls between which he stood were lined with scratchy black-and-white pictures. Everything was on a reduced scale, simple, possibly expensive; but his imagination had not prepared him to find her like this. He had pictured her as swimming toward him through tapestried corridors or gracefully threading a staircase of carved marble. Slanting his gaze through the doorway he could see, occupying a prominent place on the smallest grand piano in the world, a nicely framed portrait of Prince Carlo Kulik of Bulgaria.

The maid came back looking somewhat less receptive than before.

"Mrs. Dyvenot is resting," she announced. "She told me to ask you if there was anything important."

"Not so very," replied Buddy, who was beginning to lose patience. "Just tell her I've found her pearls and would like to know if she wants 'em in a paper bag or sent in a box."

"Just a moment."

She was gone again, this time for a much longer session. Buddy's patent-leather shoes were beginning to smart his heels and he leaned against the wall long enough to disturb one of the scratchy drawings, which came off the tack that held it to the wall. It made a ghastly noise. Buddy picked it up and was in the act of replacing the tack with his thumb when the maid returned.

"Won't you come in, sir?" she invited with a new politeness. The tack came out and the picture fell again.

Buddy took a seat on the brocaded couch in front of a

small marble fireplace. It was really an elegant little room with dull golden walls, a few bookshelves, pretty landscapes, some Chinese carvings, and the numerous articles of brightly polished junk that appeal to the person of taste. There was a bowl of orchids on the piano, and on a shelf under the window a blue-and-ivory basket overflowed with pink, white and yellow blossoms—the Dresden contribution of New York's most expensive florist.

In Buddy McNair these found an admiring observer; but the obsessing question continued to tap at the back of his head: What was the reigning queen of the society page doing in a little den like this?

Out of the space behind him some one coughed. Buddy came nervously to his feet and found himself face to face with the most talked about woman in New York.

Her simple street costume with its white collar open slightly at the throat gave her at first a girlish appearance. It was hard to determine the colour of her eyes, because she never seemed to open them wide; there were one or two tiny wrinkles at their corners. No ladylike barber had given the fine arch to her brows. Her abundant, lustrous, tawny, slightly coarse hair was drawn away from her brow, which was beautifully moulded and pure as a child's.

Buddy found himself reaching out of his trance to grasp the hand she gave him.

"You came about the pearls?" she asked. "I thought the name was—"

"It was," acknowledged Buddy, who had utterly forgotten the name he had given over the telephone. "But I'm the man behind the detective. My name's McNair."

"Yes. I saw by your card."

She gave him one of her gently offstanding glances. Her look was almost tender, but it had an entirely impersonal

quality, like the caress of an angel flying over a walled town. The thing that put her apart, in his mind, from other women was the lack of harshness in her; she seemed unequipped for defence or the giving of offence. Then he remembered how she had cut him off at the telephone.

"What makes you think you can find my pearls?" she was asking in a drawl which lacked the affected quality of the Blint technic.

"It strikes me that I have the best reason there is, Mrs. Dyvenot," he replied, and wondered just what she could be thinking at that moment.

"Yes. I'm sure you must have."

"The best there is," repeated Buddy. "I've got 'em with me."

"With you?" she echoed, her eyebrows lifting slightly. Had it been any other woman he would have sworn she was going to laugh.

Buddy got a finger into his bulging pocket and looped it under a snaky coil.

"I couldn't bring them in a box, the way they ought to be," he apologised, and began drawing the string, pearl after pearl, out of the depths of his morning coat. The dramatic being uppermost in Buddy at that moment he watched her narrowly as the lost treasure continued to unwind and at last dangled from his outstretched hand, one end touching and coiling upon the carpet at their feet. She leaned forward, her slender fingers driven into a cushion, her eyes narrowed to glowing slits.

"Where in the world did you find them?" she asked at last in a still small voice, reaching over and snatching eagerly at her necklace. The delight with which she bunched them together and held every pearl between her hands was reward enough for the great price he had paid.

"That's something I can't tell," he replied with a broad

grin. "The expense was all mine; and the pleasure too."

She seemed scarcely to hear him, so engrossed was she in scrutinising them, telling them over and over like a rosary. At last she went across to a window, and holding the clasp, with its elaborate platinum mount, up to the light seemed to be making a minute inspection of its reverse side.

"Are you satisfied they aren't imitations?" asked Buddy McNair.

"They're not that," she smiled; and the delicate flush it brought to her rather pale cheeks was wonderful to see. "There aren't any others just like mine."

Buddy entertained a passing thought on the fallibility of human judgment. A north light from the window was falling gently over the cluster of pink, white and yellow flowers above which she leaned, fingering her strand of guarded treasures. Flowers, pearls, beauty! Her bright hair, the smooth glow of her delicately moulded cheeks, the cascade of radiant bubbles falling from fingers that were more perfect than any jewels, the snapdragons on their slender stalks reaching up as if to touch her lovingly—it was for Buddy the moment of sacrificial reward.

Suddenly, with a look that was almost a smile, she reached up and clasped the magnificent necklace round her neck.

"My darlings!" she cried and raised a precious handful to her lips.

When she came back and took a place on the couch beside him Buddy had completely lost the power of speech.

"And now about the reward." Her face had taken on a more practical look as she went over each unit of her necklace. "I've mentioned a reward, you know, in—"

"Forget it, please!" he managed to say.

"I beg your pardon?" She tilted her head slightly to one side as he had seen her do that night in the opera box

when she was teasing Prince Carlo. Buddy's heart rammed against his palate.

"I mean," he said at last, "that I'm not returning necklaces as a business. If it makes you happy to get this stuff back—well, that's about the biggest bonus you can give me."

"You're not refusing a reward?"

"Well, that's about the size of it, I suppose. You see I'm in New York with time to burn and money to burn it with. Pearl chasing is the grandest amateur sport I've struck since leaving Axe Creek; and if that little trinket makes you smile—well, I count myself in about a million dollars."

"You're not a New York man—most decidedly not!"

She looked at him with that way she had. It was as though a smile were showing through the transparency of her skin.

"I'm trying hard to be," he confessed, somewhat crest-fallen.

"Oh, don't!" She shrugged the shoulder beautiful.

"How can you tell? Is Axe Creek written all over me? How do you know I'm not a New York man?"

"No New York man is decent merely as a pastime," she said, to his utter intoxication.

"I haven't been in town very long," he modestly assured her. "And I'm here to learn."

"I imagine this creek—this place you mention—is rather out West?"

Mrs. Dyvenot—Mrs. Pat Dyvenot—was teasing him for the story of his life! At that ecstatic moment he wished her rope of pearls had been a mile long.

"Just a little bit out West," agreed Buddy. "And when I say West I don't mean Trenton. Axe Creek is on the seventh peak of the Rocky Mountains as you turn to the

left on the way to California. Its elevation is nine thousand two hundred and twenty-six feet. Its principal product is gold, its principal industry milling it with cyanide of potassium——”

“How revolting!” cried Mrs. Dyvenot.

“Isn’t it? And I’m the man who poisoned Axe Creek with cyanide and continued the good work in every mining camp from Peru to the Yukon.”

Buddy saw here the necessity for rapid work; his impudence had returned and he was doing very nicely.

One of Mrs. Dyvenot’s beautiful elbows rested on the back of the couch quite near him, and the only fly in his ointment of bliss was the conscience-stricken feeling that he had gained her confidence by a trick.

“And so you’ve come to New York to live?” she queried in that soft voice of hers.

“You can’t do anything in Axe Creek but make money,” he told her with characteristic directness.

“And nothing in New York but spend it?”

It was evident that she was laughing at him subcutaneously.

“That was the idea I had of the big city when I was living in the timber,” said he. “And I don’t know that I’ve had any reason to change my mind.”

The young woman with the frilled cap had glided into the room and stood attention at Mrs. Dyvenot’s shoulder.

“What is it, Elise?” Mrs. Dyvenot frowned slightly, as though the interruption had been quite unwelcome.

“Mrs. Van Laerens is on the telephone, madame.”

“So she is. I had nearly forgotten. Tell her I’m already on the way there.”

At the conclusion of this glib tarrydiddle she turned again to Buddy.

“Well, I must be going,” said he, shuffling to his feet.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I was quite carried away. Mrs. Van Laerens had asked me in for bridge, you know. Your life in the West must have been ever so wonderful."

"Not so very," he boldly answered her.

She held out her hand. Was this to be all? Had she forgotten already about her two-hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand-dollar pearls?

"Good afternoon," he mumbled thickly.

"Good afternoon, Mr. McNair."

She smiled slightly and rose. He had taken three miserable steps toward the little entrance before he heard her say, "And I want to tell you how grateful I am to you for bringing back my darlings."

"It wasn't anything, Mrs. Dyvenot," he blurted, his face becoming hot with that swirling of emotions.

"It was a great deal—a great deal more than you know. And I don't think you should go away without claiming some reward. I should never forgive myself."

How her words could bathe him in a fountain of song!

"A cash reward wouldn't mean anything to me," he protested, clumsy as the perpetual schoolboy that he was.

"Oh, but you should be able to think of something."

It flashed across his mind how Overbeek, given a chance to make good on his promise of a favour, had turned traitor at the critical hour.

"Of course, if you're really in earnest about it," he said suddenly, looking her boldly in the face.

"How could you think I wasn't?"

It came upon him, the magic of this sudden intimacy. Here stood Buddy McNair, there Mrs. Pat Dyvenot—and she was asking him how he could doubt her earnestness!

"Well, then, you can give me a reward," he said, trying hard not to swallow.

"Anything within reason."

The smile looked out through her transparent skin.
"Will you have lunch with me to-morrow?"

"Let me see." It was all perfectly natural, as though he had asked her for a drink of water. "Let me see. I had an engagement—— Yes, I think I can."

"That's the best I can ask," he informed her.

"It isn't much. She laughed quite candidly now. "Shall we make it Tanquay's at half-past one?"

"Nothing better."

"Good-by till to-morrow, then."

That was all. The door closed noiselessly behind him, leaving him to ring for the elevator like a being still alive in the world of men and women.

Outside he found a chilling wind blowing up from Central Park. What were wind and cold to Buddy McNair, whose temperature had gone up to a hundred and four and whose brain was throbbing with delirious fantasies as he swung his Malacca stick and charged downtown, six paces to a block?

To-morrow at Tanquay's! She would be waiting for him in the lobby. Somewhere in New York, Prince Carlo Kulik would be smiting his fat forehead and cursing in Bulgarian. Buddy would sit for hours, talking his heart out. Any sacrifice, any violence would be small payment for such bliss.

What if some one should turn up with the genuine Overbeek pearls to shame him in the midst of paradise? The thought came on the cold wind, blowing up from the Hudson. It was but momentary, for fever was within him. To-morrow in her companionship! What obstacle so great that he could not meet it, charge through it with lowered head? He was mighty like an army on horseback in the estimation of that high moment.

Mighty indeed were thy thoughts, Buddy McNair; and

mighty are the thoughts of the bull elephant that spurneth his keepers, that wrecketh the zoo with his trunk and maketh earth to quake below its subways. Yea, mighty are the thoughts of the field mouse that leapeth from stalk to stalk and shouteth aloud, "How great am I in my love!"

Youth will be served, saith Nature. Springtime knows no law, saith the poet.

But Buddy McNair was a bit ahead of the season.

XII

BUDDY McNAIR was the object of several newspaper interviews next morning early, and on his way to Tanquay's had the satisfaction of learning from the first afternoon edition that Mrs. Dyvenot's pearl necklace had been restored by a wealthy oil operator named McNamara.

Jass, who had stood at the door of his bedroom and helped him on with his overcoat, had smiled and told him that he was doing very nicely, sir. There was no doubt in the world that Buddy was an apt, nay more, a precocious student. Without any suggestion from his tutor he had picked out a dark-blue lounge suit and a quiet tie to match his shirt, and the idea of being a little late for luncheon was his entirely.

He arrived at Tanquay's a few minutes behind schedule time. But this was a game at which Mrs. Dyvenot beat him without conscious effort.

During minutes that were hours he loafed in one and another of the gilt chairs that bestrewed Tanquay's reception room. The wait drove him to humiliation and despair. It was evident that she was not coming. She had thought over her rash promise, and her feet had cooled upon the threshold of adventure.

Eying each item of the happy throng passing into the dining room—giving to each the stare of morbid melancholy peculiar to him who waits with heart and stomach unsatisfied—he was diverted by the sight of Miss Doris Blint and the beautiful Mr. Hurler. Surpassing modish,

both, they came in together and stared round the reception room. Eventually the Blintish eyes, under the carefully barbered brows, wandered his way and rested upon him.

He wasn't at all certain that she intended to speak to him; but he shuffled to his feet on the chance and grinned encouragingly. Whereupon she inclined her artfully decorated head exactly two degrees, and turning to Mr. Hurler indicated a settee in a far corner.

It was apparent that Miss Doris Blint wished no more of Mr. McNair.

But at that moment all other emotions were obliterated in one crushing surge of triumph. Mrs. Dyvenot came in. She had already come through the revolving door before he saw her; and in a friendly spirit she was chatting with the coat boy into whose happy arms her coat had fallen. Buddy McNair trembled to his feet; and he had a feeling that she approached with a hidden smile, just as you feel spring under banks of mountain snow. She wore the same fastidiously simple frock and white collar he had seen upon her in yesterday's enchanted hour. Her inscrutable eyes looked at him from under a wide hat.

"Please don't scold me!" she pleaded, giving him her hand. "I thought that dreadful charity board would never finish."

"You aren't much later than I was," he declared, not to be outdone.

By the hot spot upon the small of his back he guessed where the eyes of Miss Blint and Mr. Hurler were focussed like burning glasses.

"It's just given you time to order a table!" she declared. "And of course you haven't."

"Here I've been sitting like an owl on a snake hole!" he confessed, enraptured at her scolding.

"I can always bully Pierre," she smiled as they advanced

upon the wide doors of Tanquay's dining room. A little blue-jowled captain of waiters came dancing forward ere her lovely feet had touched the threshold.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dyvenot!" he writhed his pantomime of unworthiness.

"Good morning, Adrien. Don't tell me poor Pierre is ill again."

"Ah, by no means. One moment, Mrs. Dyvenot, if you please, madame."

It seemed to Buddy that every fork in that great flower-strewn space had stopped, poised in entrancement 'twixt plate and lip at her divine appearance. Somewhere harps were twanging and a violin was wailing those complicated indefinite melodies which her presence compelled him to understand. A tall, sallow head waiter with the intelligent brown eyes of a hunting dog came forward with flat-footed dignity. The famous Pierre never permitted himself to hurry, even for Mrs. Dyvenot.

"*Bonjour, madame!*" He addressed her with distinguished courtesy. Followed a series of competitive spoutings in French. Pierre used his hands, Mrs. Dyvenot her shoulders. It was evident that she was scolding him vigorously, for Pierre was distraught, desolate, undone. His hand swept the dining room; he smiled encouragement. Mrs. Dyvenot made nasal sounds of disgust with the restaurant business. She must have scored heavily now and then, for the great head waiter's dark eyes would twinkle and his lips curl to a respectful grin.

"Pierre has evidently lost his sense of proportion," she railed, pouting prettily over at the offender. "Merely because the good tables are all taken he insists on seating us right under the orchestra with one ear in the trombone!"

"*Non, non, madame!* Monsieur, it is a small, quiet orchestra. *Mais certainement,* there is no trombone!"

"Oh, well, it's only across the street to Florio's," threatened Mrs. Dyvenot, naming Tanquay's only rival.

"We shall arrange something soon," promised Pierre.

"It's nearly tea time now."

"One moment, madame!"

There was a gleam of hope in the faithful brown eyes as Pierre looked over Buddy's shoulder and smiled. He skidded round to the spot indicated, and when Buddy turned he beheld Tanquay's ambassador in earnest conversation with Miss Doris Blint and Mr. Hurler. Every few moments the enamelled Doris would cast a humble but enraptured glance in the direction of Mrs. Dyvenot, who at once became a pinnacle of ice.

"The lady and gentleman have suggested, madame, that you accept the table which they have reserved," proclaimed Pierre, returning with a triumphant smile.

"What do they intend to do for a table?" asked she, never turning toward the philanthropists.

"They have changed their minds, madame. They are going over to Florio's. And they have sent the message that if it is any favour to Mrs. Dyvenot——"

"I see." Her smile all but broke through this time. "It is very kind of them, I am sure." Miss Blint's bow was now forty-five degrees off perpendicular as the famous beauty faintly acknowledged the debt.

"Very much obliged, Miss Blint!" sang out Buddy, truly grateful.

"Not in the least, Mr. McNair. I'm owfully——"

Just how owfully she was Buddy never knew, because Mrs. Dyvenot, led by Pierre, was already halfway across the dining room and Buddy was forced to gigantic strides to keep in touch with her advance.

It was a table for four which Miss Blint had so unselfishly resigned, and Buddy was given a chair around the

corner from his inamorata, who was now seated and ordering cocktails.

"Have them in right away, Pierre; I'm almost famished. And please don't drown them in vermouth."

"Yes, madame."

Across her menu card she looked over at Buddy and showed the gentlest face he had ever seen. Her eyes, which had opened momentarily like curious flowers, revealed clear hazel lights. And she actually smiled. It came faintly upon her small mouth with its full under lip and that graceful unnamed groove below the nostrils. There was something wisely infantile about the smile; the smile of a changeling who had been smuggled into the nursery by burglarious gnomes. "That sort of people," said Mrs. Dyvenot, glancing toward the door, "is always forcing its favours on one. However, it got us a splendid table."

"I guess Miss Blint was horning in a little bit," agreed Buddy, nevertheless remembering how he had forced his favours on one.

"Oh, you know her?"

The eyebrows went up a hair's breadth.

"I know her father, and I've met her," confessed Buddy.

"Western people, I suppose?"

"Far West. They live on Riverside Drive."

"How amusing."

The snow had covered all her smiles.

"Her father's Pontius Blint, a partner of Bonyear & Cole," explained Buddy, not without a touch of pride. "He's one of the New York managers of my Supercyanide Process."

"She looked a trifle —chemical."

Thus she sucked the winds away from his golden sails.

A waiter put cocktails beside their plates and she was

sipping daintily as Pierre himself stood attention by her chair.

"You don't mind my ordering?" she besought him very gently.

"I wish you would. It's the worst thing I do."

Again she directed at Pierre her torrent of French. At intervals the Frenchman gesticulated with his hands, shoulders and face, describing many curious dishes. Pierre had no sooner gone with his little pad and Buddy had no sooner opened his mouth to speak than Mrs. Dyvenot, glancing away, made a little joyful sound of surprise as a tall, middle-aged man in a homespun suit leaned over the table and wrinkled his parchmentlike cheeks in a smile of recognition. He had hair the colour of tow which had been dyed with weak tea, and his straggly moustache of the same colour overhung a shapeless mouth with long irregular teeth. Buddy didn't know whether to get up or remain seated.

He decided to keep to his chair just as the tall one took Mrs. Dyvenot's outstretched hand and sang out, "Hello, Sally! You have an amazing way of showing up."

"Plummie, my dear! That's like your unbearable egotism. Other people show up and you stay put, according to your story. Last I heard of you, you had been arrested for vagrancy in Aiken."

"I wish I had. I should have kept warm. Have you seen Gertie? She's over by the orchestra growling louder than the *Götterdämmerung*. Pierre seems to have gone mad."

"The scoundrel tried to give us that table. Have you met Mr. McNair?"

Buddy, who had sat neglected during this conversation, scrambled to his feet and was pleased.

"Mr. Van Laerens," Mrs. Dyvenot explained.

Van Laerens took Buddy's hand, squeezed it once and dropped it as though it had been a poisonous insect, crushed before it could sting.

"Have you poor dears had your lunch in all that babel?" the lovely Sally was asking.

"We've just been drinking it," confessed Van Laerens. "Gertie's swearing at the bass fiddle and threatening to go to Florio's."

"Why don't you come over with us? I know we'd love it."

She gave a sidelong glance at Buddy, who was apparently expected to say something.

"Why don't you?" he coaxed mechanically.

"Now that's ever so kind of you!" The long ugly face with its jagged teeth and scraggly moustache positively softened at the suggestion, but he added by way of qualification: "We're a rotten nuisance."

"Of course you are!" cried Mrs. Dyvenot. "It's always a nuisance pulling people out of the water into life rafts."

"You're famous for that, Sally."

"Run along. If it wasn't for your poor wife I'd leave you where you are, leading the orchestra."

Buddy was now definitely disappointed. Of course the name Van Laerens was fashionable enough to have penetrated as far into the interior as Axe Creek. But Mrs. Dyvenot was all the glory he wanted for that day; and as he resumed his chair her look revealed that she had sensed the cause of his silence.

"You've got to know Gertie Van Laerens sooner or later," she explained with that look of heavenly confidence. "You'll not regret it. She's the most amusing old thing."

His spirit drew another long breath and took the Pleiades at a jump. Apparently Mrs. Dyvenot was already sketching out a social programme for him!

Van Laerens shambled back, convoying a middle-aged lady, whose long face and flashing black eyes gave her the appearance of a somewhat skittish and mischievous cab horse. Buddy upset his chair in the act of rising.

"Sally, you dear!" she greeted Buddy's generous guest. "If you hadn't come to the rescue I should have rushed out of the place screaming at the top of my voice."

"Tanquay's is becoming a perfect zoo," Mrs. Dyvenot sympathised as soon as the others were seated.

"About as exclusive as a Fifth Avenue bus. Anybody with a dime can get in; and everybody does."

"Have you ordered?"

"Pierre is sending it over—unless he forgets it. I think the poor old thing is delirious at times."

"Speaking of delirium," Mrs. Dyvenot made this diversion, "is it true about Muzzy Stone?"

"Every word; and I haven't heard what you've heard. He played with the Avengers at Aiken—trained on his own private stock of Scotch. Tom Wheedel was carried off the field in the first period. Polo becomes a dangerous sport when Muzzy plays it. Of course he had to get somebody with a mallet."

"Was Tom badly hurt?"

"Not so very. Fortunately Muzzy hit him in the head." Van Laerens contributed this.

"That was fortunate! If it had been Tom's highly sensitive tum-tum—that would have been something to put in the papers."

Thus Buddy found himself a duck among swans; floating in the very shadow of their wings, pecking the same food, struggling to understand their song. When the dishes of their various luncheons came on Mrs. Van Laerens set up a brisk wrangling with the waiter over the condition of her potatoes. This brought Pierre hovering

round once more; he came just in time to be informed that nobody ever ate at Tanquay's any more. Which was surprising to Buddy because he had been forced to hunch his chair close to the table to avoid the fat lady overflowing the chair behind him.

"Gertie's always mumbling over her food," grinned the jagged Van Laerens. "It gives her dyspepsia and turns our little home into a hell."

"He shuts his eyes like an anaconda and swallows things whole," snapped his wife.

Van Laerens seemed much amused by the idea of the anaconda with the self-closing eyes.

"Gertie has discovered a new species of snake, refuting all previous theories of zoölogy. It has drooping lids with long lashes, and lives on snails which it gathers along the River of Doubt."

"Let her alone, Plummie!" commanded Mrs. Dyvenot.

"Eat something, Gertie," suggested her husband. "You've no idea how it calms her."

"How is the sole, Mrs. Van Laerens?" asked Pierre, leaning over her as soon as she had tackled the food.

"A mess," she replied smoothly. "I like Tanquay's impertinence—calling this sole Marguery."

"Pierre, bring us all whisky-and-sodas," suggested Van Laerens by way of a truce.

"My word!" Mrs. Dyvenot's unfathomable eyes were staring across space.

"And mine also!" exclaimed Van Laerens, following her gaze.

Middleton Knox, winding his way through the crush, was coming toward their table. The same Jascomb look that Buddy had seen on that weasel's face on the night of the opera was there twofold to-day. To Mrs. Dyvenot and the Van Laerens his mien proclaimed him the worshipful

doormat; and it was not until his eyes had rested upon Buddy McNair that he betrayed a certain difficulty in gauging his servility. When Van Laerens had come to his feet and Buddy, all against his will, had followed his example Knox had apparently made up his mind about the interloper.

"Ah, McNair, how do you do?"

His handshake lingered as he went jauntily on: "Whom should I congratulate—the finder or the findee? It's all in the evening papers—half the time your name is spelled right; and by putting the accounts together I am forced to conclude that you own all the cattle, sheep, kerosene, rawhide and timber between the Gila River and the Yukon. At any rate, you're lucky—luckier than Mrs. Dyvenot, I should say."

All eyes were now on the blushing Buddy, the Van Laerens obviously not sure whether or not Mr. Knox was announcing an engagement.

"Mr. McNair found my pearls, you know," Mrs. Dyvenot explained quietly.

"I didn't know you'd lost them," confessed Van Laerens, and his wife looked equally dazed.

"You poor ignorant things never read the papers," taunted the beautiful owner of the necklace.

"Sit down, Middie—if that's what you're going to do," invited Van Laerens.

Knox motioned a waiter, who slid a chair up to the corner between Buddy and Mrs. Dyvenot. Quite bland as to the discomfort he might be causing he began at once to look over the menu card.

"So you found Sally's pearls!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Laerens, turning her horselike face toward Buddy.

"It didn't amount to anything," he assured her.

"I don't agree with you," she insisted in her positive way.
"I hope you charged her a whacking reward."

"He was too chivalrous to take a cent," announced Mrs. Dyvenot, in a voice that appreciably raised Buddy's temperature.

"He's a Westerner," chimed Knox from behind his card.

"Are you starting stinging so soon?" asked Mrs. Dyvenot, turning upon the weasel-faced cynic.

"Come now—you don't think me so venomous," he urged quite unmoved.

"No, Middie—not when you're properly crushed. I think you would look sweet if your skin were prettily tanned and draped round a hat the way cowboys wear cobra skins in the Far West. They do, don't they, Mr. McNair?"

"Search me!" said Buddy. "I come from a mining district." What was the use of explaining that cobras didn't grow in Colorado?

"How fascinating!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Laerens, who, just as her husband had predicted, had been calmed by her lunch. "And just where is that?"

"Axe Creek, Colorado; altitude nine thousand two hundred and twenty-six feet."

"In terms of aviation," came in Knox, who was ordering copiously.

"It must be dreadfully stimulating," suggested Mrs. Van Laerens. "It's no wonder there's so much shooting and romantic crime. I suppose they have to do something, poor things. Tell me, were you ever wounded?"

"Once," confessed Buddy.

"I thrill! Tell me more at once! Was it a bullet aimed by a masked bandit?"

"No. It was a brick."

"How sordid."

"Wasn't it? You see they were building a new cyanide

mill, and a Portuguese labourer spilled a wheelbarrow load of 'em off a ninety-foot wall. A swamper at the foot of the dump got most of 'em, and never swore again. I got what was left in the shoulderblade."

"Off a ninety-foot wall at an altitude of nine thousand two hundred and twenty-six feet—I have a poor head for figures," drawled Middleton Knox.

"And my temperature went up to a hundred and seventy degrees Fahrenheit," responded Buddy with a splendid calm.

He at once became the centre of interrogation.

"And that was the altitude too?" asked Mrs. Van Laerens with the air of one who is quizzing a captive cannibal.

"Not entirely. You see it was like this: Axe Creek has only one general hospital, and during the dull season they run it with one doctor and a nurse. Her name is Sarah Jepp—she has a good heart and one glass eye—and when things are slow round the hospital she does odd jobs for her brother, Hadrian Jepp, who is in the undertaking and embalming business. Being a nice girl, full of family affection, it is quite natural that Sarah should have her mind on helping Brother Hadrian's business. But I must admit that it gives her a peculiar bedside manner.

"Well, they took me to the hospital, and Sarah tucked me in. I could see from the first minute that Sarah thought I wasn't doing the right thing by Brother Hadrian. I went on improving right along, and every morning when I woke up stronger Sarah Jepp got gloomier and gloomier. She kept worrying because I didn't have any temperature; and every time I'd open my mouth to swear she'd jab a thermometer between my teeth and leave me while she ran round to Brother Hadrian's shop with a box of silver polish."

Buddy glanced up to catch the effect on his audience. Knox had stopped eating. Both the Van Laerens were leaning forward, taking in his every word. Only Mrs. Dyvenot permitted her glance to stray across the room.

"Come, come!" urged Van Laerens; "don't leave that thermometer there forever, you know!"

"Well, on the fourth day, about noon, she gave me the regular thermometer and disappeared toward Brother Hadrian's embalming parlour. While I was lying there, wondering whether I hadn't better swallow the darned thing and have it over with, in comes Mike, the orderly, with my lunch. It was a regular hospital lunch—cup of cambric tea, rib chop off a humming bird, and a baked potato. I was trying to figure out just how I could absorb the lunch without absorbing the thermometer when I got one of those hunches. Simple enough when I thought of it. I just pulled the thermometer out of my face and jabbed it into the potato. Pretty soon I heard Sarah Jepp coming, so I got the thermometer under my tongue again as soon as she had opened the door and had come skating toward me with a pill on a tin spoon. First thing she did was to pull out the glass tube, shake it like a sore finger and hold it up to the light, squinting with her one good eye. 'A hundred and seventy!' she screams. 'Let me have your pulse!' I gave it to her, but she wasn't satisfied. 'You haven't got any!' she hollers, and calls in the whole surgical staff. I guess they'd have been holding an autopsy on me yet if I hadn't got tired of it and walked home."

"You've mentioned everything but your walking costume," drawled Middleton Knox.

"I used to get mine ready-made in those days," replied Buddy, imitating his drawl. "Claymore & Co. Ever tried them?"

Knox swallowed a very large mouthful and was silenced for a time. Van Laerens tittered.

"I should think it would pay a motion-picture director to follow you round," Knox at last gained force to say. "Something smeared with rich red blood. There's millions in it. The Wild Man of the Mountain."

"Why don't you try for yourself, Middie?" asked Mrs. Dyvenot ever so sweetly. "Anything with a million in it is supposed to interest you."

"The Wild Man of the Mountain?" asked Knox in that abashed tone he always used for her.

"The Tame Man of the Flat, I should say."

"Consider yourself rolled out," grinned Van Laerens, and winked his watery eye toward Buddy McNair.

Buddy paid the check when the time came. Van Laerens protested that it was an outrage, but made no move toward his money pocket. As for Middleton Knox, he, at the moment the waiter was seen approaching with a slip of paper, excused himself momentarily to pay his respects—nothing more expensive—to some agreeable Mrs. Jack Horner in a far corner of the dining room.

Buddy hadn't the least intention of disputing the red-inked figures he saw on the waiter's slip; and though the luncheon had been brought upon him unawares and had cost him more than a month's board at the Axe Creek House he put it down as a part of his initiation fee to the circle into which Mrs. Dyvenot had introduced him.

The Van Laerens, who were going to a Rigoletto matinée, excused themselves.

"Perhaps there's still an act," she explained in her off-hand way. "And I say, Sally—you're coming to us tonight, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I—unless you've some abominable surprise you're keeping."

"Oh, no."

Suddenly she turned her large, square-toothed smile upon Buddy.

"And what are you doing to-night?" she fired point-blank in that New York accent, which was thus far to Buddy a terrific jumble of vowels.

What should he be doing?

"Nothing particular," he artlessly replied.

"Then why don't you come to us?"

Apparently he was being invited to something, therefore he spluttered his grateful acceptance.

"Awfully glad—usual hour—quarter-past eight. See you both then," said she, thrusting forth a large ringed hand.

And the two awkward pillars of the social register got themselves away, leaving Buddy to his enchantress.

"Do you know what we might do with our afternoon?" she asked.

With their afternoon! It was impossible for him to speak his gratitude.

"They're going to a Rigoletto matinée. I've heard it only once this season. Suppose you telephone and see if McSwain's Bureau hasn't got somebody's parterre box on sale. They sometimes have one at the last minute. You might inquire in my name."

Buddy's flying feet took him to the telephone booth, where after preliminaries a smooth voice assured him that a parterre box was vacant and would be held for Mrs. Dyvenot.

His taxi ride with her was a roseate jumble of which he subsequently remembered little, save that in the midst of a miraculous acquaintance she had a way of standing off from him in a world he knew nothing about. He didn't

tell her very much about himself, though she was surely sympathetic. But her mind was no easy market of exchange. The frank and boyish Buddy, who all too eagerly would have unrolled his life at her feet, much as an Arabian dealer shows a carpet, found himself ever playing with new reserves. He never seemed to be saying what he wanted to say. He was always afraid that she would not approve or that he wouldn't phrase it well. It kept him in a state of uncomfortable eagerness; and where he was eager she was cool.

They got the tickets at McSwain's Bureau on the way to the Metropolitan, and the price would have paid for another Tanquay luncheon.

"I'm so glad we could get one!" she exclaimed as they were mounting the stairs toward the parterre. "It's so much easier to talk when you're in a box."

The lights were dimming in the third act as they took their seats. Uninterrupted in the twilit space they sat well back quite absorbed in conversation which Verdi's strains did nothing to spoil.

"It sort of makes me dizzy," said Buddy—"mushing in fresh from the timber and finding myself giving the right hand of Christian fellowship to a gang of American peeresses."

"Wild Man of the Mountain!" she teased through the exotic dusk. The brim of her broad hat scraped his cheek. It hurt and he liked it. An outer barrier of reserve seemed to have crumbled momentarily.

"I guess I'm mostly rough gravel behind the ears. But you should have seen me before that vallyay got hold of me."

"That what?"

"One of those Englishmen you hire to dress you."

"You mean a valet."

"I suppose so. You see I've tried to conquer New York in a week. It may kill me, but I'll die game."

He paused while several brightly dressed beings on the stage confessed their personal secrets in a series of trills.

"Yes?"

Again her brim scraped his cheek.

"Well—I might as well take my soul out of my pocket and show it to you. It was you who brought me all the way to New York."

"I am delighted. But how, pray?"

"Way up in Axe Creek I saw your picture in the papers. I've been following you for years, because you seemed so much more lovely than anything I'd ever seen——"

Through the dimness he could see how narrowly she was taking him in.

"That's a remarkable compliment," she said very softly.

"It was just a fool ambition," Buddy went on. "And when I made my pile I packed up and came."

"I see."

She had never taken her eyes off him.

"And when I saw you sitting there in that box, as natural as a sheriff at an auction—well, I'm not religious, but something must have guided me that night."

"What night?" she asked, rather too icily.

"The night you lost your pearls."

"Oh, yes—my pearls."

"I'm not trying to drag 'em in by the hair of the head, as it were. But it was a big red night when I got a chance to find 'em for you."

"I—I'm ever so grateful. You can't imagine how much worry it saved me."

The words were inadequate in themselves, but it was the way she said them—as though she had learned a speech, and a mediocre one at that. What ailed her? Did she

think him doubly vulgar for coming back to the subject?

"Wild Man of the Mountain!" she suddenly burst forth. And it was startling, because this was the first time he had heard her laugh. It was a short, delicious sound, as though two of her pearls had clinked together and were giving forth music.

"All I want is education," Buddy implored. "You'd be surprised how quick I learn. I almost learned dancing in four lessons—and you should have seen me before Jass got hold of me."

"I really believe you could learn," declared she, coming back to the natural voice of which the pearl theme had bereft her.

"You're dead right I can!"

"Of course your wildness is a part of your charm; but there are a few things that won't do."

"For instance?"

"Shall I begin your first lesson? Well, when you're sitting at table with ladies you ought to rise when any one comes up to speak."

"Including the waiter?"

No. Excluding the waiter."

"Including Middleton Knox?"

"I appreciate your hesitation there. But he must be included—even though you get up to kick him."

"Keep on!" Buddy besought her.

"You're rather nicely groomed. Apparently you are fortunate in your valet. You have the appearance of an outdoor man. The nine thousand two hundred and twenty-six feet are to be thanked for that, I fancy. Don't allow yourself to become pasty. You oughtn't to keep the band on your cigars when you smoke. I'll give you the name of a firm that will make your cigarettes by the thousand—but there! That will be all for to-day."

"Oh, give me something hard!" he demanded.

"Well, then—don't try to entertain people whom you've just met with long droll paragraphs of autobiography."

"Referring to the story of the thermometer and the hot potato?"

"They are both delicious—but a trifle intimate. And I'll stop now—before I become offensive."

"You wouldn't be offensive to me if you used my ears for bookmarks," he told her above a rapturous burst of song.

"You haven't tried me. I might."

Mrs. Pat Dyvenot, the centre of the society column, was sitting with him in a darkened box, employing a music that Verdi never knew, and telling him that she might prove offensive to him!

"And you're going to teach me some more?" he pleaded boyishly.

"It would be very amusing," she rippled, "to become a mountain-lion tamer."

And the orchestral strains swelled up to them, one long-drawn note of love-stricken harmony.

XIII

THROUGH the pleasantly febrile condition that he carried back with him to his hotel her parting words kept running like a musical theme, "See you to-night, I hope."

Most certainly she would see him to-night if Buddy had anything to do with it; but as to the exact nature of Mrs. Van Laerens' invitation he was in a state of wildest conjecture.

"Why don't you come to us—usual hour—a quarter past eight?"

Now what is a stranger in town supposed to do when a lady speaking the local Choctaw dialect comes toward him with such a proposition? Quite evidently Mrs. Van Laerens was giving a sort of evening party—but what do people do at a quarter past eight? That was about the theatrical hour, as he understood it. Possibly Mrs. Van Laerens was giving one of those private theatrical performances of which he had read in the Sunday papers. All this, of course, would necessitate an early dinner and a hurry call upon Jass.

At any rate Buddy was game; and game he remained as he unlocked the door of his suite on the eleventh floor of the Merlinbilt. He had scarcely turned the knob when on the carpet before him he saw a card plainly marked "Telephone." Across its ruled lines it bore the pencilled instructions: "4:15 P. M.—call up Riverside 22602."

At first glance Buddy McNair had no intention of calling up Riverside 22602, because he at once recognised the

number as that of the Blint apartment. Hadn't he troubles enough, what with thinking of Mrs. Dyvenot and trying to figure out the Van Laerens' party, without encountering Doris Blint? If Blint wanted to talk business with him he could wait till to-morrow, thought Buddy; and upon that thought the telephone rang.

"Hello."

It took but the two syllables to assure him that Miss Blint had found him out.

"This is Doris Blint," came the drawl.

"How d'you do, Miss Blint?"

"Very well, thank you. You naughty boy! I've been owfully miffed, the way you've been neglecting us. And now I see the reason why."

This reversal of form took his breath away. It was thus that she had talked to Mr. Hurler.

"I rang you up once or twice," Buddy temporised. He was learning.

"Fibber!" she accused with coy promptitude. "But I can't blame you—with Mrs. Pat Dyvenot as a rival—"

"Fo-get it!" he harshly commanded.

"How can I?" she inquired. "But she might spare you for a little while, don't you think?"

"I guess so."

"Why don't you come to us this evening?"

Come to us again! Everybody seemed to be getting it.

"I—I've got an engagement later," he faltered.

"Oh, just for a little look at you." The wires wept with her pleading note.

"Thanks ever so much."

"I'm owfully glad I!"

"I'll have to eat pretty early."

"We could make it a *dîner intime*."

"A which?" he asked nervously.

"Just informal. When is your engagement?"

"At a quarter past eight."

"Oh l!"

She paused and he enjoyed a hopeful feeling that this would prove too much for her.

"Then we can have a little bit together!" she caroled at last.

"Would six-thirty be too early?" he asked, determined that she shouldn't make him miss the Van Laerens' party. "That would be putting you out pretty much, wouldn't it?"

"Not in the least. I should be dreadfully, dreadfully disappointed if you didn't come."

"I can pick up a snack round the hotel——"

"Don't be silly! Where are you going at a quarter past eight?"

"To the Van Laerens'."

"The Plantagenet Van Laerens?"

"I suppose so. I've forgotten his first name."

"Plummie," she promptly supplied. "Won't that be awfully jolly for you! And I'll send you over in our car."

Well, that was arranged! Buddy hung up the receiver with the prevalent New York feeling that he was trading an hour's peace for an hour's annoyance and there was no way out of it.

It was in rather a sullen mood that he summoned the diplomatic Jass and had himself trussed up for an appearance at court. After all, he philosophised later, he would have to eat somewhere; and though he abominated the Blint women old Blint himself was a good sport and an honest man.

In the electric-lighted Temple of Karnak on Riverside Drive he found the Ethiopian soldiers waiting for him in a more receptive mood than he had encountered before. The giant at the gate bowed him in with a toothy smile.

"Yessa! Right up, sa!"

The gleaming elevator lifted him with smoothness and dispatch. In the mirrored vista he was pleased to note a company front of perfect Buddys. The whole line of them, pinkly massaged as to complexion, silk-hatted as to head, mink-collared as to throat, stood like a platoon of minstrel artists he had once seen parading in the main street of Axe Creek. He lifted his gold-headed cane in respectful salute. The entire company, drilling like clockwork, responded, to a man. Here was civilisation!

At the end of the golden hallway Miss Blint, a sprightly bundle of spangled lace, threw away her cigarette and gave him both hands in an access of hospitality.

"I was owfully worried for fear you'd forgotten me—for other things!" she gushed.

"Promptness is my fault," he blurted, somewhat embarrassed by the tenacity with which she held on to his hands. "But I'm getting over it."

"Don't!" she cooed, bathing him in the shallows of her eyes.

He had a chance to regard her there. Her skirt was merely a wisp of silk, and there wasn't much waist worth mentioning. Her hair was so tightly drawn back from her porcelain-lined forehead as to give her a slightly bald appearance. With those barbered eyebrows, that enamelled complexion, those carmine lips and a beauty patch on her left cheek bone she looked like an amateur actress playing the part of a clown.

"And I have a confession—you won't think I'm horrid, will you?"

Buddy promised to think nothing of the kind just as the maid came in with cocktails.

"Poor dad had to go to Chicago and mahmah's laid up with an attack of gripe. She sat in a draft at the

Insomnia Wednesday night; but mahmah never would take advice. So"—she hesitated a semicolon's worth—"so we'll have this ridiculous early dinner all by ourselves."

"The fewer the better—that's my vote!" said Buddy with specious heartiness.

"Have a cigarette?" She motioned him to a place beside her on the couch. "We'll begin that picnic dinner in just a moment. Now tell me about Mrs. Dyvenot. How in the world did you come to find her necklace?"

"Oh, I just picked it up," was his offhand method of accounting for a miracle.

"Just picked it up! I knew you were a Prince Fortunatus—the very first night I saw you."

Her look was cloyingly sweet, glowing with memories. He had a fleeting recollection of her attitude toward him on the night when he had spilled a double portion of hors d'œuvre on her gown.

"I was so thrilled when I read about it in the papers. It seemed too lucky for just a mortal man—however clever."

She leaned closer and surveyed him roguishly.

"Are you sure you didn't steal her necklace and give it back just to make her acquaintance?"

"It would take a braver crook than I am to get away with that," he told her, trying to meet her ridiculous suggestion with a humorous tone. He had no idea that Miss Flint could be so keen a guesser.

"People would do anything to meet her, you know," she stuck to the subject.

"Dinner is served," announced a maid, appearing at the folding doors. Buddy breathed again.

"Just bring your cigarette in with you. I always smoke during meals—when mahmah isn't round."

They sat cozily at one end of the big dining table, some-

what reduced from the size he had seen upon his entrée into society. There were several glasses round his plate, and Buddy concluded that his picnic dinner would prove satisfying. He was glad of it, because the day's fatigue had given him an enormous appetite. Also he must fortify himself against a long hungry evening at the Van Laerens' entertainment. And he would like to show Miss Blint that he could take an hors d'œuvre without chasing it all over the platter.

There were no hors d'œuvres. The maid brought in a rich soup and filled his glass with sherry. Meanwhile Miss Blint was rattling the pebbles inside her gourdlike skull. Was Mrs. Dyvenot entertaining this year? Why had she given up her house and gone to live in a little apartment, as Gossips' Weekly had recently hinted? As Mrs. Dyvenot's warmest moods had not been autobiographic Buddy had nothing to reveal on these scores.

"Of course she doesn't say anything about her husband?" she intimated across the oyster patties.

Buddy hated to be interrupted by this nonsense; he was hungry and eating heartily.

"Naturally not," he agreed, and took a second helping. If he was going to spend a long hard evening at the Van Laerens' he wanted to go on a full stomach.

"No—she wouldn't!" lingered Miss Blint fondly. She wasn't eating much. When he looked at her he saw that her brown eyes had assumed a wise little leer.

"It's her business not to know poor Pat—in public," said she.

"What's the idea?" Buddy was disturbed at this, but he continued industriously with his food.

"There isn't any—really. And then you know her so much better than I do——"

Buddy had forgotten that Mrs. Dyvenot had ever had

a husband, and at the mention of his name he was filled with an unreasonable jealousy.

"Excuse me for eating so much," said Buddy, "but I don't know how many hours I'll have to starve at that party; and everybody talked so much at lunch I didn't get a chance at more than two broiled shrimps."

The maid was now coming round with a heavy platter.

"Do take a large helping of the duck," Doris urged. "I know how you feel. I sometimes go to the theatre and can't enjoy a thing, I'm so ravenous. . . . How do you like Plummie Van Laerens?"

Thus temptingly she offered Plummie as a side dish with the duck. Buddy revealed his newly acquired skill at fishing for food over his elbow before he replied.

"If he'd kept sober and stuck to his work I should think he'd make a pretty good ticket agent."

"Oh, boy! You have the cutest ideas. He's inherited nearly all the railroads in the world. Don't you think he's fascinating?"

"Sort of. Do you know him?"

"No—I've never happened to meet him," she volunteered; "but I've often sat near him at the Ritz and watched him order his lunch. He has such a charming way with the waiters."

Buddy went on eating copiously of the duck. Whatever he had against them the Blints certainly hired a good cook.

"He's a dreadful old heartbreaker. Gossips' Weekly had the funniest article about why he goes down to Asheville every winter and leaves Gertie at home. But now that you're in the smart set I suppose——"

She never said what she supposed; but when Buddy at last looked up from her successful rival, the duck, he was aware that she was giving him her most languishing stare.

Her eyes were brown and restless like a monkey's; and curiously enough they had a certain fascination.

"Oh, I'm just The Wild Man of the Mountain," Buddy explained, awkwardly aware of his blushes. "And I've come to town to get tamed."

"You've come to the wrong town for that," she giggled and lit another cigarette.

There was a heavy salad after that and then a dish of highly educated ice cream. While the affable Doris clowned eagerly and chattered from her frivolous tree top Buddy sat and glutted the wolf within him. He didn't seem to mind her any more. It was like getting used to a jazz band with your meals. The Blints certainly kept a good cook.

At coffee and cigars he took occasion to look at the trifling wafer of a watch which admirers in Axe Creek had presented to him.

"Eight-four!" he growled. "I guess I'll have to call a taxi and hurry up. I hope you'll forgive me if I eat and run."

"Oh, I've ordered our car to be here," she assured him, "and I'm going with you as far as the door!"

Buddy sat stupefied with overfeeding and underthinking.

"Thank you very kindly," he protested. "I don't want to put you to that trouble."

"Trouble! It's the thrill of the year for me."

She had leaped to her nimble feet and hurried ahead of him to the drawing-room.

"Wait here just a sec'. I'll have Nina bring your hat and coat."

She wasn't much longer than her promise, and Nina had scarce slipped the fur collar over his shoulders when she came back in a pink-and-white striped cloak.

"Now we must hurry," she commanded with a grimace

between a grin and a pout. "We mustn't keep Mrs. Dyvenot waiting."

As the big closed car was hurrying them by a short cut through the park's invisible social barricade Buddy became aware that the seating space was growing narrower and narrower.

"You aren't going to be so cool and haughty next time?" Doris Blint was cooing as she toyed with his sleeve.

"Certainly not! To tell you the truth, I had a notion that it was you who were cool and haughty," he defended.

"How can you think so?" Then a pause. "But of course on first acquaintance—"

Here was the moment of dramatic contrast. Again flashed on the blank screen of his subconscious mind a moving picture—a moving picture with appropriate music. He recalled that first ghastly party at Blint's, how her laugh had tinkled like a tin can and informed the whole table of his struggle with the worm-infested beets; how she had looked her disdain upon the poor best that Axe Creek could offer in the way of store clothes.

He could feel her silken shoulder against his upper arm.

"You aren't offended or anything?" she asked in a baby voice.

"Far be it from me!" he assured her, ready to jump out of the window in case of emergency.

"Because I had never laid eyes on you before. Daddy asked you to the party without a word of explanation. I didn't realise—"

She never finished, but he knew what she hadn't realised. Nobody, at that time, had informed her how rich he was going to be as Supercyanide royalties from every gold mining district in the world rolled in, year after year. And she had not then seen him going into Tanquay's with Mrs. Pat Dyvenot.

The car turned in between the snowy gate posts and rounded the circular driveway before the Van Laerens' white-marble palazzo, which—exotic in New York—had a front yard of its own. Other motor cars were stopping ahead of them, while light slippers and fluffy skirts twinkled out of carriage doors and up the steps. Doris Blint's eyes were round with gazing; they betrayed the jealous fascination of a child who, uninvited, beholds a richer neighbour's Christmas tree.

"Come soon!"

She reached over and gave his hand two affectionate squeezes.

"Thanks, I will. And that certainly was a good dinner," he cordially informed her. He spoke but the truth, for he was fairly distended with good food.

"And sometime we'll all have a party?"

By her yearning look, cast toward the big door past which she was not to go, it was plain to see who she meant should be included.

"I hope so. Good night. Remember me to your mother!"

XIV

BUDDY made a bold entrance into the Van Laerens splendour; for he was bolstered—literally—by the belief that an army fights best on its stomach. There were two or three silk shrouded ladies who came in with their escorts at the same time and were whisked away by a maid-servant while a manservant divested the gentlemen of their coats. These latter guests seemed inclined to hang round the stairway, waiting for their ladies; and as they waited Buddy beheld a new marvel.

A liveried man was passing small envelopes on a tray. The face of this functionary, despite his servile get-up, was reminiscent of other days; and upon a second inspection Buddy recognised him to be none other than one of the gallant blades who had been so attentive to Miss O'Brien at the servants' ball. To-night he was as perfect a footman as he had been a clubman during that adventure in Araby. And in his hand he held a silver salver replete with those small unaccountable envelopes.

The envelopes worried Buddy—possibly Mrs. Van Laerens was planning a valentine party. There was no doubt that the envelopes had to do with the guests for each gentleman, ere passing up the stairs with his lady, stopped and pawed over the pile, selected one, opened it and gazed. New York had taught Buddy to be slavishly imitative under such circumstances. Therefore he also pawed until he had come upon a square of paper distinctly if flourishly labelled "Mr. McNair." He never looked at the footman during the choosing ceremony, but he had a disagreeable

impression that the footman was looking at him. He got the flap open, and under the clumsy fingers of his white gloves pulled out a little card upon which, written in the same angular scrawl, was the name "Mrs. Harbinger."

Buddy was baffled. It seemed indequate, to speak mildly, for his name to be thus coupled with that of a lady he had never met. Wherefore the envelope, wherefore the card, wherefore Buddy?

The footman stood at gaze, fixing him with the brown undeviating stare of a watchdog.

"Look here," asked Buddy in a moment of isolation, "who is this Mrs. Harbinger?"

"She's just gone up, sir," replied Andrew in much too loud a voice.

"Well, what's she doing in my envelope?"

"It is Mrs. Van Laerens' arrangement, sir." His look was ever so blighting.

"But what's the idea? What am I supposed to do with the lady?"

"I should say, sir"—he spoke with a terrible distinctness—"that you are supposed to take her in to dinner."

Dinner!

Buddy stroked his waistcoat, distended with delicacies from the Blint cuisine.

Then the disgusting situation was apparent. Mrs. Van Laerens, when her peculiar Choctaw dialect had invited him to "come to us at a quarter past eight," had been inviting him to dinner! These peculiar people ate their food in the middle of the night. And at the entrance of their feasting place stood Buddy McNair, filled to the repletion with chicken gumbo, oyster patties, roast duck, assorted vegetables, complicated sweets; layer upon layer the dinner he was just beginning to digest turned over and protested against the impending indignity.



W.C. MORRIS

A LOUD-VOICED HERALD SHOUTED BUDDY'S NAME AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS, WHERE STOOD MRS. VAN LAERENS WEARING A THOUSAND-DOLLAR GOWN IN A WAY TO CONCEAL ITS VALUE.



100

100

—

Well, there is a desperate philosophy which applies to all living situations, including death. You can do anything once. A loud-voiced herald shouted Buddy's name at the top of the stairs, where stood Mrs. Van Laerens wearing a thousand-dollar gown in a way to conceal its value.

"How do you do!" she challenged briskly, jerking his hand and dropping it suddenly. "Been a rotten day, hasn't it? I hope you're starved."

Buddy hoped he was; and being shoved aside for more important arrivals he began looking round for his sole interest in life. She was standing against a scarlet Chinese embroidery, a slim figure in pallid silk, her wonderful hair glowing against the flaming background, those pearls—which all the world, except Buddy and Twillaway's salesman, knew as the Overbeeks—falling over her white bosom. These strange faces round gave Buddy a feeling of panic. At the very thought of a second banquet dyspepsia was setting in. He stumbled forward in hopes of shelter under her white wing.

He found her flirting busily with Prince Kulik of Bulgaria.

"You see I didn't lose my way," she smiled softly, giving Buddy her hand. "Mr. McNair, Prince Kulik."

The fat Adonis turned upon the interloper eyes that were popping out of his head like those of a tormented bull. Across his shirt front was a decoration.

"Shamed, I am sure."

His hand was flabby and characterless like a hot-water bottle. He turned again to Mrs. Dyvenot and continued to woo in French. This was of course exciting for Buddy, who began to teeter from foot to foot. When a man came round with a tray of cocktails he accepted one, but banished the caviar sandwiches as he would an evil dream.

It was with the courage of desperation that he tossed off his drink. It affected him like a violent poison. His head began to ache. Miserable, neglected, he looked bleakly round for a place upon which to set his empty glass. There was not an unoccupied surface to be seen anywhere, save the floor; and he knew that if he should set his glass on the floor some one would come along and kick it; and the crash would be blamed to him.

"Whom are you taking in?" asked Mrs. Dyvenot, turning for a moment from the disagreeable nobleman.

"Let's see." Buddy fumbled and brought out the envelope.

"Oh, Jess Harbinger! You have my sympathy."

"Pretty bad?"

"Rather! You'd better look her up before dinner is announced."

"Guess I had."

Despite her offhand manner he had a feeling that she was looking after him.

"She's the one with the icy-grey hair, standing there by the railing."

Buddy attempted to hide his empty glass under the folds of his coat as he tottered over and presented himself to Mrs. Harbinger. He informed her that his name was McNair, and she seemed only slightly interested. A runtish, yellowish brunette whose name sounded like Mrs. Llama engaged most of Mrs. Harbinger's attention. Buddy continued to hover. The contemplation of Mrs. Harbinger was like facing a third banquet, more indigestible than the rest.

People began stringing away toward the dining room.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Harbinger inexorably.

Apparently some action should be taken at once.

"I guess it's our move," Buddy agreed, looping his arm

in the same pigeon-wing manner as the man in front of him was doing. She infolded his elbow, but with his every struggle to get forward she was pulling him back.

"Don't you think you'd better get rid of that glass?" she asked uncompromisingly.

Buddy looked down and became aware that he was still carrying his empty cocktail glass. He found a little patch of dirt under a palm, and into this he dropped it guiltily. Then like a small but sturdy tug towing a liner out of harbour he drew the great lady into the vast dining room.

Everybody seemed to be having a pretty good time, with the exception of Buddy McNair. At his right sat Mrs. Harbinger, at his left the dark lady whose name sounded like Mrs. Llama. With Buddy the conversation went no better than the food. He sat there, hedged in by unfriendly powers, helpless, interned. Up and down the long table were bright faces, some of them beautiful, many of them human. People were laughing, chaffing, flirting, revelling in the joys of light intoxication. Six or eight places up the table Mrs. Van Laerens was provoking bright laughter by her witty style of grumbling. Mrs. Dyvenot sat almost across from him, but she was always looking at Prince Kulik—looking with that slanting glance which Buddy had been appropriating all afternoon.

The other side of Mrs. Llama the fashionable English actor, Sir Hedgerowe Keepe, told about himself in a distinguished accent which bore the same ratio to the Jascomb method of syllabification that cauliflower bears to cabbage.

Mrs. Llama hearkened occasionally, but most of the time was keeping up her dialogue with Mrs. Harbinger, using Buddy as a convenient sounding board through which to talk. He seemed a satisfactory medium, because the ladies got on famously together.

"Ninskovich has no emotion—he follows the abominable

Blorgens method—influenced by Blowski," Mrs. Harbinger barked fiercely at Mrs. Llama.

"I don't agree with you." The dark lady was small but game. "Hammerflors and Klugg both demonstrated the sliding-body technique."

Buddy was interested for a moment, thinking that the ladies had gone in for wrestling, or Swedish massage at the mildest. But a moment later when he found that all those difficult names referred to disciples of the Neo-Hellenic Dance he turned again to inward gazing and wondered if he were going to have an attack of acute appendicitis. He tried to eat something with mushrooms in it and suspected, too late, that he had partaken of toadstools.

"None of them have the virility of Ivan Snork," went on Mrs. Harbinger's vibrations through his ribs. "Do you think so, Mr.—Mr. McCloskey?"

He turned and found that she was addressing him.

"I've always had a sort of sneaking fondness for Sorghum Peet," he confided in a hushed tone.

This stilled her for only a moment.

"Indeed?" She took him in, then permitted her hard eyes to fall on his plate. "You're not eating," she accused him, as though that were an argument.

"I have a headache," he complained, not without cause.

"You ought to take care of that right away!" she commanded, her fierce eyes boring into his skull. "I had a butler—a great deal the same build as you. He became very dull and peculiar. I accused him of drinking—one does, you know. Poor William! Do you have loss of appetite and dizziness during meals?"

"Right this very minute," he encouraged.

"That's it!" she cried triumphantly. "You have all the symptoms that came out in poor William. I don't think he was ever quite right. I found after his death that he

had been stealing provisions for years. Does the pain run from your temples to the bridge of your nose?"

"You've got it!"

"Well, you'd better go to a specialist—I'll write it out for you—have you a pencil?—his name is Doctor Slaughter—and I'm perfectly sure he'll find you have just the same trouble as killed my poor William."

"What killed poor William?" he faintly inquired.

"A growth at the base of the brain."

Buddy felt much too ill to protest. When he looked across the table and saw how languishingly Mrs. Dyvenot was taking in Prince Kulik he was sure Mrs. Harbinger was right; he couldn't have squandered his thousands on so thankless an object unless something had been loose in his skull.

The sufferer sat there looking straight into the pearls with which he had paid the price of admission; nearly a quarter of a million for the privilege of hearing a fierce dowager tell him that he had at the base of his brain the same growth that had killed her poor William.

He prayed for an earthquake—anything to break up the meeting and let him go home. Gladly would he have upset the dinner service or tripped a passing footman, but the surroundings had sapped away his nerve. Just then an obese bird on a hot plate was laid before him. "Eat me!" the bloated carcass seemed to challenge. He looked moodily round. The gaiety had appreciably increased. Everybody at the dinner, save Buddy McNair, had drawn a peach.

Out of the racket he heard his name being called:

"Oh, Mr. McNair!"

At the head of the table he could see Mrs. Van Laerens' horselike countenance directed amiably toward him.

"Mr. McNair has the drollest story about his life in the West."

Mrs. Van Laerens' peculiar voice had a carrying quality which seemed to engage the attention of everybody round the enormous table with the exception of Mrs. Dyvenot and Prince Kulik. Buddy could feel his chair wavering under him.

"Do be a good chap, Mr. McNair, and tell it!"

Rapidly through his mind there passed the list of Don'ts with which Mrs. Dyvenot had furnished him at the Rigoletto matinée. "Don't tell long anecdotes" had stood out most prominently among her commandments. She had been most insistent against that tale of the Axe Creek hospital. He looked over to her, his eyes begging counsel. Hers were still upon those of Bulgaria's heavy prince.

"You mean—that one about the thermometer and the hot potato?"

He hoped this would attract Mrs. Dyvenot's attention, but she never looked up.

"Yes!" Mrs. Van Laerens brilliantly besought. "And how you were wounded by a brick at an altitude of two hundred thousand feet."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Van Laerens—I've got a bad cold—I——"

Again he cast a lorn beseeching glance across the table. Should he ignore Mrs. Dyvenot's disapproval? Mrs. Van Laerens appeared to be expecting something from him; but on the face of the woman who should have guided him through that difficult moment there was no helpful ray.

Over the dinner table there had fallen the hush peculiar to an expectant audience. Mrs. Dyvenot stopped talking and lifted her unfathomable eyes just as Buddy cleared his throat and began.

XV.

SOME three months after his first dinner party at the Van Laerens' found Buddy McNair taking his after-breakfast cigarette as a man of fashion should in the library of his new Fifth Avenue apartment. Mrs. Dyvenot had gotten this place for him on a sublease from the estate of the now incompetent Sagan Rae. Colour blindness as well as chronic alcoholism had plagued poor Sagan, so a half brother of Mrs. Dyvenot had conveniently come forth to exert his skill as an interior decorator; and the harmoniously expensive results Buddy might have appreciated this morning had he chosen to look around him.

But the leading item in the current issue of *Gossips' Weekly*—Miss Blint had taken the trouble to ring him up and recommend it—now claimed his entire attention.

. . . Our Lady of the Vanishing Pearls is making her Wild Man a little wilder than Nature ever intended him to be. Poor, bleeding denizen of the crags! But Society should be grateful—as it is—to its perpetual enchantress, who seldom permits boredom to settle long upon the big S. The pearl finder of Axe Creek has proved a rich find and a merry one. She roped him with a pearly lariat and led him in at just about the time when everybody was yawning over his vaudeville.

Mister Wild Man, who is said to carry any number of lethal weapons under his well-tailored dinner jacket, illuminated his first evening in polite society by springing an Out West tale of a thermometer and a hot potato, which set Society to roaring his praises. As a result he has been accepted, claw, tooth and hair. The *Lady of the Dis-*

appearing Pearls has gotten him an apartment where, I am told, his half-yearly rental will cost him enough to build one of his celebrated cyanide mills—or is it arsenic? Brother Charlie, who is in the interior-decorating line, has done the Wild Man a most civilised apartment. You may be sure he doesn't suffer for the lack of *objets d'art* from the early Ming period to the late Stung. She keeps him perfectly in leash, employing a method of intensive culture, much as you learn Spanish by phonograph; she shows him on the end of his chain, accepts for herself the tributes of the Mighty Few, and finally leads him away by the cute li'l' ring in his nose. Her rare managerial ability has made a virtue of his crudeness; his humorously twanged Rocky Mountain anecdotes, his nine-thousand-two-hundred-and twenty-six-foot point of view and his terrific innocence are all good for a bright spot in the dullest of dinner parties.

They say she rehearses him. Who can blame her? She can't go on losing her pearls forever, and she must have something to keep her in the eye of Society. Indeed she has added the Wild Man as another pearl to her already extensive string—a freshwater pearl. May he never be dissolved in the vinegar of cynicism as others have been!

Buddy touched a button under his new Jacobean library table, and the faithful Jascomb, whom he had removed from the Merlinbilt with his other belongings, came promptly forth.

"Jass," he inquired, never looking up from that damnable implication, "have you laid out my clothes?"

"Yes, sir. They are quite ready, sir."

"Well, go to the second drawer of the third bureau from my bed and bring me my six-shooter."

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"My gun—cannon, killing iron, lethal weapon, mitrailleuse, lead sprayer. For heaven's sake, haven't you learned how to dress a gentleman yet?"

This was the first harsh word he had ever spoken to his

dear Achates. Jascomb stood a quarter of a second longer than good form demanded.

"Very good, sir."

Presently he brought it back, carefully laid, muzzle toward him, upon a pure white napkin. It was the long-nosed, pearl-handled instrument that Mr. Wing had left in the assay office upon his escape to California. Buddy broke it across his forefinger and examined the six copper disks at the back of the cylinder. The thing hadn't been fired since the days of Wing, and Buddy had never been much interested in revolvers. With some difficulty he pulled out the six cartridges which had lain dormant for years; and after being satisfied that they were loaded he stuck them back in the cylinder and snapped the barrel into its place.

"I beg pardon, sir. Might I ask——"

Jascomb stood there quaveringly, his face expressing quite unusual emotions.

"Shoot!"

The response was perhaps unfortunate, for it caused Jascomb to leap as he had never leaped before. But when he had tottered back to calm he spoke again in the voice of perfect valetry.

"Might I make so bold, sir, as to ask what you are intending to do with that pistol?"

"Well, what would you say, Jass, if I gave you one guess?"

"Some violence, I take it, sir. I trust you're not intending yourself any 'arm. Some sporting gentlemen do, after coming it a bit thick, what with late hours and 'igh jinks of all kinds. I well recall, sir, the case of the third Lord Hamwex, who did himself in after——"

"When you recall this, Jass, you'll find it's the other fellow's been done in, as the saying goes."

"Duelling, sir, isn't vogue, if I might say so."

"Duelling, hell! I'm going to shoot an editor."

"Thank you, sir."

Jascomb still stood as though unable to quit the horrid neighbourhood of the revolver.

"Who is the editor, sir, if I might ask?"

"The editor of Gossips' Weekly," explained the master.
"Anything the matter with that?"

"I should not say it was legal, sir." Still Jascomb stood, and it was apparent that he was not entirely satisfied with the arrangement.

"Well, what's on your mind now?" demanded Buddy, aiming Wing's rusty piece at a cloisonné vase across the room.

"I was thinking, sir. If the editor person has threatened violence why not leave the affair to a roundsman?"

"Get me into my chain armour and turn me loose!" growled Buddy, leaping to his feet with a determination poor Jass had never before beheld in his strange employer.

Buddy looked up Gossips' Weekly in the telephone book, and going forth found that publication's office in short order. He took the lift in a smart business building, got out at the floor indicated by the operator and discovered a glazed door plainly marked with the offensive name. He entered a pretty little outside office, a tastefully arranged space with dull tinted walls and a few well-chosen pictures on uplifting themes. Two or three people were waiting round on settees and at a tidy desk sat an anaemic young woman who smiled over at him with the sad merciful eyes of a missionary.

"Was there something?" she asked in a sirupy tone.

"I want to see the editor," demanded Buddy, not relaxing his severity.

"Have you a card?" she pleaded with those haunting eyes.

He presented his card, and when she had risen she inquired: "Would you mind telling the nature of your business?"

"I want to see him about an article in his sheet attacking the fair name of a lady——"

He spluttered into silence, but brought out a copy of Gossips' Weekly, open at the offending paragraph. "Will you have a seat, Mr. McNair?"

It was in the tone of a nurse humouring a difficult patient. She left him to glower upon his surroundings. It might have been the waiting room of a board of foreign missions for all the crassness or suggestion of evil he saw there. A neatly dressed lady sat by the door entertaining her little girl, who was looking at a picture book and asking appropriate questions, like, "Mother, why does a elephant eat hay with his nose?" A young man whose length of hair and chin proclaimed him a poet tilted near a window, nervously examining a portfolio.

When Buddy sat down he felt the revolver jamming uneasily against his hip bone. He wasn't at all sure he could manage the thing; he had never toted a gun in Axe Creek, and everything in the world might be the matter with Wing's discarded weapon. Wing seldom abandoned anything of value. To shoot up a place like this seemed ridiculously inappropriate, like shooting up a church. Not at all like the offices of the Axe Creek Republican, where publishing was considered among the dangerous sports and editors were never quite out of season.

Nevertheless, a lady had been insulted; and here was an affair to be settled among men, man fashion. Buddy had about decided to permit the editor to defend himself when the girl with the forgiving eyes came back and beckoned him in.

In the next room he found a secretary a little older and much more soft-spoken than the one outside.

"I'm looking for the editor," he explained.

"So I understand, Mr. McNair," she cried affably. "It will be just a moment. Won't you have a chair?"

He sat down hard upon his revolver and again took survey. This room was larger and more homelike than the outside office. On the wall opposite him hung a portrait of Abraham Lincoln; on the wall at the right a large coloured reproduction of Leonardo's "Last Supper." There was no taint of worldliness in this little space. The atmosphere was Christian. The mature young lady at the desk, whose rather plain face was beautified by the inward-looking gaze of the recluse, was reading from *Science and Health*. Presently she looked up and smiled.

"Won't you have something to read?"

"Don't care if I do," acknowledged the prospective murderer.

She came over and handed him an art portfolio. It was entitled *Ecclesiastical Architecture of the Old World and the New*.

Buddy became so fascinated in the ornamental details of the Cologne Cathedral that he never knew when or how she slipped out of the room.

Finally he consulted his watch. It was long past his lunch hour. He slammed down the folio and sprang to his feet. This was an outrage. Here he had spoiled a good morning and missed his lunch—and the scoundrel of an editor had never shown up! He was putting on his hat with the reflection that Wing's gun needed cleaning anyhow, when the lady reappeared.

"Step in, please," she invited, holding the door for him.

There was an air of lavender and old lace about the next compartment in his pilgrimage toward revenge. The

pictures here, too, were nearly all of an ecclesiastical or sentimental nature. A cozy fire snapped in a small oval fireplace; and on a mantelshelf above sat a colony of pretty bisque dolls. A half-finished piece of embroidery lay across a chair, and from a desk in a corner the sweetest old lady in the world rolled a strip of knitting over her needles, and rising cleared the chair for her visitor.

"Good morning, Mr. McNair!" she dimpled, blessing him with a look through her steel-rimmed spectacles. "I hope you won't mind—everything's so topsy-turvy. It's my little granddaughter's first birthday next Tuesday and I've simply got to get these things done in time. The little dear!"

She held up the infant's cap she had been knitting, and her whole plump person in its modest black gown seemed to dimple with good will.

"I've come to see the editor," explained Buddy, hesitating to mention so unpleasant a subject before so pure a picture of old-fashioned motherhood.

"Well," she dimpled, "you've got the right people."

"You don't mean to say you're the editor!" he gasped, almost slipping from the chair.

"That's what I am," she confessed, beginning again to knit at her granddaughter's cap. "That is to say, I'm all the editor there is just at present. Of course Mr. Mink is the owner, but he's been in poor health for three years —poor man, it's his stomach! Was there something?"

She looked at him over her glasses, which had slipped far down on her nose.

"There is something," acknowledged Buddy, trying hard to work himself up into a passion. But it was like challenging his grandmother. He pulled Gossip's Weekly out of his pocket and spread it before her.

"I'd like to know how that—that snake-bitten outrage—ever got into your paper?"

"Dear, dear!" She clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth as her gentle old eyes peered through the spectacles upon the column. "How could it have gotten in? What do you think it's all about? There don't seem to be any names mentioned—it's really quite confusing."

"It's plain enough to any one who knows the people," growled Buddy. "The Wild Man they're talking about is me. And the lady they're trying to libel is Mrs. Pat Dyvenot."

"You don't say!"

She puzzled so hard over the text that she must have dropped one or more stitches. Finally she turned upon him sweet, conscience-stricken old eyes, bright with tears.

"I knew it!" she cried. "I fairly knew something would happen. Here it's my first month on the paper and I've been trying so hard to follow instructions. I'm Mr. Mink's great-aunt, you know—everything has been at sixes and sevens—they've been running the paper by a sort of editorial board—dear, dear. Mr. Mink will be so vexed. He especially warned me against printing anything of a scandalous nature."

Buddy was afraid she was going to break down and weep outright, so he softened his tone again.

"How does such stuff get in?"

"I'm afraid I've been careless. Society people are continually sending in those spiteful articles; and they're bound to get mixed in with our regular matter——"

"That isn't going to make things any better for the lady," he chided very gently.

"No. I realise that. Let me see!" The yarn with which she had been knitting had run out, so she rummaged in a drawer and brought out a new skein.

"Let me see!" She spread the yarn on the desk before her. "I'm so inexperienced—I shall go mad as a hatter

if some one doesn't take my place pretty soon. Let me see. Oh! Couldn't we print a little something, just to show how sorry we feel? Wouldn't that make it all right with everybody?"

She looked puzzled, so inadequate, so foolishly contrite that Buddy's man-killing humour evaporated.

He even found himself thanking her for her thoughtfulness.

"And I'll communicate with Mr. Mink. He'll be dreadfully cross with me when he hears what I've done.

"I—I wonder—" She turned her gentle eyes pleadingly, helplessly, upon him; deep dimples were in her motherly cheeks as she held the skein of yarn toward him between her two hands.

"I've simply got to finish this cap before Tuesday. I wonder—wouldn't you hold this for me while I wind it into a ball?"

Buddy finished the interview in the pose of John Alden, sent on one mission and held for another and entirely different one.

His foot had scarce touched the pavement of Fifth Avenue ere a familiar, mournfully clad figure came slinking forth from the shelter of a building.

It was Jascomb.

"Been following me round?" asked Buddy, firing the last spent bullets of his wrath at that devoted head.

"I took the liberty, sir, of standing by in case of need."

"That was thoughtful. You probably saved my life."

"Thank you, sir. I kept my eye on the roundsman." He indicated a blue giant strolling indifferently by. "And if there is anything further, sir—"

"You might ring up the patrol wagon."

"Yes, sir. For whom, sir?"

"The editor."

"Where shall I send him, sir?"

"To the Old Ladies' Home."

Jascomb had already started on his mission when Buddy whistled him back.

"Telephone Connors to have my car—the touring car—at Mrs. Dyvenot's address by half-past two."

"Very good, sir."

XVI

THE unusual display of bloodthirstiness had been undoubtedly an attack of nerves due to an impending crisis. Arabia's nights are short nights, psychologically speaking; winged horses wait to bear beggars into the splendid suites of sleeping princesses, where they can be crowned at once, and so they are married; by the same magic djinn can snatch fat kings off their golden thrones and cast them into reeking river boats to be lost adventurously. Little more than eighty of the thousand and one nights had gone and Buddy McNair was now far advanced in the esteem of Mrs. Pat Dyvenot. Gossips' Weekly's version of the affair had been murderously accurate, full of veiled aspersions that robbed the presumptuous lover partly of his dream.

Swinging up Fifth Avenue through the soft April air he betrayed his faith into wondering what that abominable talebearer had meant. How was she adding another pearl to her string? How was the Wild Man doomed to be dissolved in vinegar? Sally Dyvenot had kept him so blissfully hypnotised; he had asked her so few questions. How had Pat Dyvenot stood with her, how Terry Overbeek, how the bull-eyed Prince Kulik of Bulgaria? The hidden assassin had directed the article at him and at her with a sort of wholesale scorn of them both. What about the pearls—why drag them in? Was somebody suspecting the manner in which he had restored the gems to the lady who had so effectively entwined him in their coils?

This afternoon he had made an appointment with her

for a tour out to Switherton, where she had selected a country house for him. He had already made a payment on the property and to-day, for the first time in his Roman triumph, he was beginning to appreciate the expense of doing as the Romans do under such circumstances.

He took a pick-me-up luncheon at the Concord Club, to which Plummie Van Laerens had renewed his two weeks' card. Plummie had also proposed him for the Tory Club, and he was now on the waiting list, with prospects of election some six or seven years hence. He tried to be alone as he took a remote table at the Concord's grill, but several of the younger members insisted upon greeting him cordially and beseeching him for his story about Skinny Macleod's corpseless funeral. Buddy, who was in no anecdotal mood, accepted their cocktail and hurried away to keep his appointment with Mrs. Dyvenot.

He saw the glistening steel sides of his long-hooded motor in front of her door, and he was just turning to enter when she came out, veiled and cloaked for the journey.

"Buddy, you're learning too well," she sang out, giving him her hand. "But you shouldn't be late for me."

"I had a piece of business on," he explained moodily, "and the lady kept me waiting."

"The lady!"

Her eyes came plainly into view, filled with inquiry as he helped her into the tonneau and the car rolled smoothly westward. "It's not my fault that the editor of *Gossips' Weekly* isn't a man."

"Buddy, my dear! What have you been doing with the editor of *Gossips' Weekly*?"

"Well," he confessed somewhat sheepishly, "I was intending to shoot him."

"You foolish Wild Man! What for?"

"You saw the article——"

"I didn't see any shooting offence in it."

"Well, in Axe Creek when the editor insults a lady——"

"Poor Buddy! When will you learn that this isn't Axe Creek? Worldly people don't get cross when Gossips' Weekly dangles them on the wire. Gossips' Weekly's only method of insult is not to mention you at all."

"Ghost of Great Henry!" He was silent all the way across the Hudson.

Mrs. Dyvenot had a way of tolerating his silence as a nurse would those of a sulky child. She was always cheerfully ready to pick up the thread when he came round again; and to-day he came round with sidelong glances at her beautiful face, pinking against the spring winds. He had a dreadful impulse to touch the small idle hand lying so near his on the lap robe.

Instead he cleared his throat and said: "That's a mighty fine house. I was wondering if it mightn't be a little too fine for me and Jass."

"But, Buddy dear, you'll branch out."

"You mean I might take a notion to get married?"

"Who knows? You shouldn't go on indefinitely, wasting yourself on the universe, you know."

"Yes, but——" He had grown very husky. He made a try and foozled lamentably. "Who'd want a roughneck like me?"

"There's Miss Blint."

This was an instance of her strangely tenacious memory, but her taunt seemed out of place with the divine situation.

"There's suicide too," grumbled he, just as they were turning in among the crooked, civilised upland drives of Switherton Park. Great houses with white façades or rambling Tudor towers showed hazily through the budding twigs. An Italian came forward to open an iron gate and let them in to Buddy's own drive. It was a brick house of

Georgian type with many latticed windows and a wide portico, which overlooked an architected landscape with poplar-lined roads, an effective pool and many ornamental bridges.

"It isn't really large," she reassured him when he had turned the key in the front door and they stood in the wide, high entrance hall. To Buddy it looked like a deserted hotel, lacking soul.

"It's some smaller than the Taj Mahal," he agreed.

Beyond he could see the deep-corniced drawing-room, some thirty feet across.

"This dining-room," explained Mrs. Dyvenot, walking over to the high panelled enclosure at the right, "is a fearfully vulgar Tudor. It reminds me of a hotel grill in a third-rate town. You must see Charlie and have that done in something white with a border."

Buddy gazed, unresponsive. He had hoped that this house, plus the fortune in furniture he had already bought, could be used as he had found it. For the first time in months he was doing difficult sums in mental arithmetic.

"Come on, Buddy! Don't stand repining. I don't believe you have any taste for anything but food. Come look at the billiard room." She had bounded across to the other end of the hall.

"What a heavenly life you'll have here!" she went on rapturously. "And what ugly stuff they've put on the walls! That can't stay. And look, Buddy! This will interest you—a beautiful little buffet, built into the wall, with two ice boxes and racks for all sorts of glasses. Nobody could avoid happiness here!"

He had seldom seen her so sprightly. She took him by the hand and dragged him up the broad staircase to the second floor, where among a confusion of white doors they found the master's suite with two broad bedrooms connect-

ing, a complicated bath and dressing room with each, closets as big as hall bedrooms, some of them panelled with mirrors, others papered with exotic flowers, furnished with shoe racks, hatracks, skirt racks—enough rings and horizontal bars to supply a gymnasium.

At the end of the passage they came upon a wide square room with a white door. It seemed to be neither a bedroom nor a boudoir. It had a blue-tiled mantel embossed with daisy designs and the wall was papered with naïve representations of creatures, presumably out of Noah's ark. Unlike the rest of the house, the woodwork here bore marks of violence and misuse.

"What do you suppose this is intended for?" asked the artless Buddy McNair.

"A nursery, I suppose," said Mrs. Dyvenot. She walked over and stood by the window.

"A nursery!" His imagination leaped with the small playing ghosts of the room.

"Of course if you want to you can have Charlie make it into an upstairs library."

She never turned round and her voice was quite detached.

"Sure! Yes, this would be a fine room to keep encyclopedias in."

Reflectively he paced its length. She continued to amuse herself with the outdoor view. Now and again he would stop and examine some shred of pasted paper or a scratch on the woodwork, looking closely, much as an Egyptologist reconstructs civilisations out of worn hieroglyphics. They were pretty rough children, he concluded—rough and full of ginger.

He looked across at the woman, who never turned her head. How gracefully her little veiled hat sat above her furs!

He walked over and did a heroic thing. He took her

hand. She never resisted, and as though the deed had spurred his courage he began blurting in her ear.

"Sally, you must know it—it's your fault for leading me this way—I'm crazy to ask you to marry me."

"Why don't you?"

She had swung round, so it was quite natural that his arm should encircle her waist. And when he had kissed her through her veil it brought him a mixed delight. He had never thought of her lips as being cold to the touch.

"And now?" she asked, standing off and giving him the light of her eyes.

"Sally"—how he prayed for power to overthrow that reserve, to speak out as man to woman—"Sally, I don't see how it can be possible. Somehow it seems—sacrilegious. You've got to remember where I come from. What right have I got to ask the finest lady in the land——"

"But you have asked me, haven't you?" she suggested with her phantom smile.

"Yes."

"And I've accepted. Don't you like your bargain, Buddy?"

"It has driven me crazy, I think. Can it be possible that you love me?"

"Enough to marry you." This slumped him to earth dreadfully. He stood looking at her a long moment.

"Don't be cross, my poor, blessed Wild Man!" she pleaded, and coming over twined her arms round his unworthy neck.

As soon as they had gone down to the main hall and Buddy had signalled his car back to the drive he struggled with a confession.

"Sally," he said, "I want everything to be on the square with us, right from the start. If you've got anything on your mind don't hesitate to let it out. I'm game!"

She laughed.

"That means, of course, that you've a guilty conscience. What is it, my dear?"

"It's about your pearls." Her eyes narrowed.

"What's happened to my pearls?" she asked with unusual asperity.

"Nothing that I know of. But I've wanted to tell you right along. The pearls I brought you—the ones you've got—aren't the genuine Overbeeks."

"You poor child! What's this foolishness?" Her voice was strangely mild, considering the seriousness of his revelation.

"Well, you see I've been so wild to meet you for the last two or three years that I've gone a little wrong in the head, I guess. And when I came to New York and found that you'd lost your necklace I—I played a sort of dirty trick on you. I went over to Twillaway's and had 'em string together a necklace, a duplicate—ninety-two pearls exactly like the ones you lost. They must have been a good job, because they fooled you. I've always tried to play square—but after that first glimpse of you at the Metropolitan I was so loco I would have stolen my brother's sheep."

She regarded him mysteriously and Buddy was utterly unable to interpret that look, whether it spelled praise or condemnation.

"They must have cost you a dreadful sum," she faltered, bringing her hands together in a weak gesture, uncharacteristic of her.

"Two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars," he boldly confessed.

"How you must have loved me to do that!" she exclaimed suddenly, and seizing his hand in both of hers drew his amazed fingers to her lips.

After the car had started on its homeward journey she came back again to the subject.

"That's the sort of practical joke a rajah might play," she mused.

"I guess I was a little proud and haughty that week," he grunted. "But I'm fading fast as I go along."

"You mean—things aren't going well with you?"

"Not exactly that. You see I sold out my interest in the Axe Creek plant for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and I got a big royalty on my process just before I lit out for the East. That's blown now—"

"That doesn't mean of course—"

"That I'm broke? Not entirely. There'll be another royalty coming in June."

"You're a pessimist, my dear. Certainly your credit's good till that time."

"Sort of. But I'm already beginning to live on that."

"Now that's another confession you didn't make," she smiled.

They had been sitting very close together. Perhaps it was Buddy's sensitive imagination that gave him the feeling that she had sidled away a fraction of an inch.

XVII

WHEN he left her in the entrance hall of her apartment house she let him hold her hand a trifle longer than was usual with him. That was about all the difference. Yes, and she smiled, too, which was rare with her. He was glad that she was no taller than he; for at that moment he could not have endured being looked down on.

"Good-bye, my dear," she said. "We'd better let things drift along—not talk about it among people for a while."

"Can't I come round and see you to-night?" he urged rather self-consciously, wondering why, now that they were engaged, he didn't dare address her by pet names.

"No, you mustn't. Carlo is giving a party—naturally you're not invited."

"Oh. Of course not."

"You're not going away cross, Buddy?"

"No—Sally, I just thought——"

"Why don't you give me a party to-morrow night? It will be our betrothal feast—that will be our secret, of course. Just have the Van Laerens and the Bitnors, and we'll sit downstairs afterward at some rakish musical show."

"Then I shan't see you until to-morrow night?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear. Those stupid Willie Cram-buns are giving a luncheon—you'd be bored stiff."

"Well, good-bye until to-morrow night."

Awkwardly again he took her hand.

"You won't forget to call me up in the morning?" she reminded him coaxingly as in a mixed frame of mind he

said his first good night to the woman he was pledged to marry.

At the door he dismissed his car, having decided to walk. Through the sweet late afternoon of spring Buddy went away, assuring himself time and again that, like another Joshua, he had blown enchanted bugles and seen the walls of high resistance tumble at his feet. He had conquered. Without a struggle she had capitulated; this woman whom he had worshipped as an incarnation of the unattainable, whose printed picture he had nailed to the wall under the tin roof of his little lean-to in Axe Creek, had accepted him despite the competition of princes, polo players, millionaires. His name was to fill that place which the newspaper illustrator had left vacant in the fifth point of her star. The most talked about and certainly the loveliest woman in New York had promised to become the wife of Buddy McNair of Axe Creek!

Then what is wrong, Buddy McNair? Why jaunt so moodily, knuckling your fashionable cane like a sword disgraced? Have not her delicious lips touched yours, unworthy? Have not the elbows beautiful crooked to an embrace responsive to your own? Has not the golden voice whispered "Dear," meaning you? Buddy, it can't be possible that you are sad!

"I'm happy—you bet I'm happy!" he was saying over and over to himself as he took the down slope of Madison Avenue, past flower stands, jewelry shops, windows bulging with expensive knickknacks; distantly the Metropolitan Tower showed its lacy flame in the springtime dusk.

"You bet I'm happy!" he was repeating at every step; and at every step he was savagely lying to himself. But the subconscious Buddy knew the truth and realised that Buddy was disappointed. After his bitter and costly strug-

gle to reach the flame he had found it to be a cold fire, a fire that neither warmed nor burned him.

He stopped at a pretentious florist's in the lower Fifties and bought her thirty-five dollars' worth of orchids.

Buddy had preferred pink roses with delicately curling petals and a rich yellowish glow at the centre; but when the florist scornfully mentioned the price—three and a half dollars a dozen—he realised that they would never do for her.

In the upper Thirties he turned to the right toward Broadway. By now his subconscious mind was kicking vigorously against the happiness theory in the front of his brain. How beautiful it had been when she had leaned an instant to brush his jowl with her veiled cheek! How little she had said after all! He had often pictured triumphant love, but somehow it had never been like this. He had kissed her through a veil—that was it. Women of her sort loved as they lived, mostly in reservations. They were too delicate, too subtle for the whole-hearted romances of common people. The next time, perhaps, or the next he would begin to feel the high ecstasy. Of course it was perfectly natural that she should keep the engagements she had made with other men.

Pan was piping along Broadway as he joined the dinner-going throng. Male and female, linked together in every combination of April joy, they floated along, conversing in notes of laughter; or more pertinently, with the eyes. It was mating season in Babel. The softening time of year had brought out the little fauns, who had doubtless been sleeping winter away under the Times Square Station; and Tempe's shepherds were a-wooing in new dollar-eighty-nine hats.

Directly in front of him strolled two youthful couples, very much entwined. The men wore flat-crowned hats with

sporting bands and snappy belted spring overcoats. The girls were small and sprightly and they kept their melting brown eyes upon those of their protectors. They reminded him of Miss Blint, cheaply clad and humanised.

The girl in front turned back and giggled to the lagging pair: "Gee, Sadie! You poor nuts better hurry!"

"I guess Jo knows what he's doin'," responded Sadie, squeezing the sleeve of her weedy young man, who was pale and had a beak like an ibis.

And the most fortunate man in New York felt very lonesome.

Stray men and women met and joined and passed on. Rather debauched sentimentalists stood, heads close together, flirting over picture post cards in windows of cheap-Jack stores. Two by two the prospective revellers were seen fluttering out of taxicabs, to be swallowed up by gorgeous lobster palaces. The on-and-off-flashing corset advertisements, the popular tunes belching over the street from phonograph shops, bright eyes glowing up at him under the glare, languorous policemen pausing at corners for a word with a fair pedestrian—in these changing visions he saw nothing of the weariness and cynic leer of Broadway. He saw only the thing of which he had been cheated and for which he had squandered so magnificent an investment.

At some vague hour he began to miss his dinner, and a yearning sensation brought him up standing before a high stained glass façade marked Automat Grill.

Apparently a place to eat, since people were chewing toothpicks as they came out. He entered upon a vast hall all tiled in art nouveau designs like a giant's bathroom. And there were wonderful white-topped tables set at intervals, while round the walls people were walking and staring like a multitude at a closely packed menagerie. A mechanical pipe organ whinnied forth Poor Butterfly. Here indeed

was a forecast of the new and terrible mechanical world that some advanced thinkers would wish upon the revised socialistic generations to come. Following the throng he saw, upon intimate observation, that the walls were lined with little glass doors, each resembling a post-office lock-box, each provided with a coin slot and a brass knob, each showing behind the glass a slab of roast beef, a sandwich or a cut of pie. The tempted loiterer would click in the required number of nickels, the glass door would fly eagerly open, a morsel of food would be snatched forth and borne toward that forest of white-topped tables.

Buddy wasn't hungry, according to his gauge of the symptom, but he felt that he owed it to himself to go through the form of eating. Therefore he followed the crowd to the cashier's conch-shell booth, where he changed fifty cents for a stack of nickels. Thus munitioned he went forth to peer upon the glass cased exhibits. A beautiful sign in illuminated glass announced Sandwich Section, and there a specimen marked B & B Roll Egg Salmon Special— 2 Nickels gained his approval. With this elaborate dish in hand he sauntered down the line toward the Hot Dishes Section where B & B Chicken Pie— 3 Nickels caused him to insert the proper number of coins; and behold sesame fly open with a snap.

There was a niche in the centre wall, a white-tiled grotto wherein dwelt a wonderful silver dragon whose name was Coffee. Coffee had an angry expression and large open nostrils from which jutted two silvery spouts. He was flanked on either side by piles of greenish cups and saucers, and the magic power of Coffee was this: There was a slot marked Nickel right over his grotto, and when you slid a cup under his two spouted nostrils and dropped one nickel in the place so obviously suggested, then out from his right nostril would spout hot coffee and from

his left hot milk until your cup would be accurately filled —no more, no less.

Just ahead of him at the magic fount a dark browed swain and a straw coloured lass were leaning before the dragon whose name was Coffee. She was holding various items of the dinner they had collected from the glass windows; he was filling two cups. She gave to Buddy the regretful feeling that plus beefsteak and exercise in the open air she could still be turned into a pretty girl. Her coat was fashionably trimmed with cheap fur, and at her belt she wore a somewhat wilted cluster of lilies of the valley. They had just been married, and the world to them at that moment was golden.

"Hun-bun," she was cooing, "you oughtn't to took so much pie. We got to economise now."

"Gee. I bet your old lady'll blow all over the island when she hears!"

"Let 'er blow," she invited with a seraphic smile, showing many gilt teeth. "I don't care for nobody now."

"Not for nobody?" he pleaded.

And the most fortunate man in New York was like to weep for very desolation.

After dinner he chose his own toothpick and strolled aimlessly toward Fifth Avenue. The thirty cents' worth of nourishment eaten in those mechanical surroundings had had a strangely humanising effect. The feel of the wood between his teeth brought a certain consolation. Undoubtedly he had been under a great strain these two or three months—and Sally Dyvenot had admitted that she loved him at least enough to marry him.

He saw the unwieldy top of a Fifth Avenue bus swaying toward him as he stood on a corner. The conductor brayed "One on top!" as he helped Buddy aboard and started him up the ladder.

It was unfortunate, to say the least, that Buddy should have chosen such a vehicle for a lovelorn ride that balmy starlit April evening—the top of the Fifth Avenue bus, which has become New York's municipal mating ground, and where, as soon as dying March inspires the crocus buds, the wistfully unmarried may sit two by two and become engaged for the very reasonable charge of a dime.

The first glimpse he got as soon as his head came above the ladder was that of masculine arms comfortably crooked above the backs of every seat but one. Foolish little heads were snuggled against broad shoulders—in every seat but one. And beside the single vacant place sat a prim gaunt lady, well beyond middle age, the unoccupied half of her seat all too symbolic of her unloved state. Buddy lurched his way over to that space and sat down. The bus, intent upon its turn into Riverside Drive, blundered forward toward Fifty-seventh Street.

Buddy McNair's eyes strayed morbidly round over this carnival of lovers. Every pair sat amorously clamped together, little chirping soprano monosyllables responding to deep basso growls. Mentally he tried to put himself in one of those happy places. He tried to imagine Mrs. Pat Dyvenot announcing her engagement in this somewhat candid fashion, on top of a Fifth Avenue bus. The picture affected him so strangely that he found himself tittering out loud. The angular lady at his left drew away her skirts and sidled over toward the rail.

"Fare, please!" snarled the conductor in his ear. He turned and faced an implement like a blunt nosed revolver, pointed menacingly toward his breast. Buddy forced a dime into the slot, and the gaunt lady, resting a thin elbow on the rail, continued to gaze bleakly into Fifth Avenue's second-story display windows; evening wraps of velvet and ermine, Chinese pottery of ancient lineage, Louis XIV

bedroom suites—on these she gazed with the hard stare of one who has been cheated of both luxury and love.

Buddy McNair sighed. He wondered if he had aged visibly since coming to New York.

Long before they had reached Grant's Tomb or turned toward the gaieties of inland Harlem Buddy had gathered most of the life history of the spooning couple in the seat ahead. She had pretty brown hair—he could see by a glimpse under the arc light—and her baby mouth was reinforced by a long upper lip. He was short and Semitic, with shaggy eyebrows and hair that curled over the ears.

"Douglas Fairbanks is playin' at the Coogan Casino," she suggested.

"Let's stay on and ride back to the Square."

"Why?"

"You're a lot more fun than the movies."

"But I love to see Douglas Fairbanks, don't you?"

"What's so grand about him?"

"There's somp'n about him like you."

A silence.

"Comin' round to the store to-morra?"

"Can't get away. The boss is a crab. But say—you oughtn't to be lonesome with all those fresh electricians hangin' round."

"How can you talk like that, Sol? Do you think I could look at anybody else—now?"

"How about Douglas Fairbanks?"

"Oh, him! He's only a picture!"

"All right—let's get off."

At the end of the line the bus took on a fresh load of lovers for the trip downtown. Buddy lost his old maid and drew a fat gentleman; and growing weary of affection by proxy he resumed his brooding melancholy. Hope re-

vived gradually. He was sure the rosy cloud would come to-morrow, when he would see her again. He would try to arrange it so that he could snatch an hour from her busy day—an hour of confidences in which, perhaps, she would tell him a few things he deserved to know. He had no intention of nagging her into confessions about poor Pat; but he had a right to demand an explanation of what others hinted at. And her romance with Terry Overbeek—of course that was in the past; but would she ever come sufficiently close to him to whisper the key to that mystery? And where did this fat Bulgarian stand? Would he go right on keeping up the appearance of a suitor? What would be Buddy's attitude after they were married? He had a vision of himself in the rôle of a much-enduring husband.

It was beginning to drizzle when the south-going bus reached the Forties. As they were approaching the white globes above the cornice of Florio's he took the ladder down to the sidewalk. B & B Roll Egg Salmon Special was lying heavily among his depressed thoughts; and he had taken the whim to sit in Florio's pleasant café and sip away the taste that was beginning to gather in his mouth.

But after all the crowded state of Florio's café discouraged him. Peering through the glass partition into the smaller of the dining rooms he saw one or two little tables empty in a good situation, overlooking the lobby. Germain, captain of waiters, who had long since accepted Mr. McNair among his bowing acquaintances, showed him to a table by the glass partition; and Buddy, having ordered a drink and a cigar, indulged himself in the vacant joy of gazing upon those coming out of the big dining room along the narrow lobby.

Several good substantial people, middle-aged and dull, gathered in a group and passed the postprandial time of day.

The Tauchnitz Fieldings and their party swept past and bowed to him before they went out through the revolving door. He wondered if Prince Carlo might not be giving his dinner here to-night. He wondered, too, why he wasn't jealous. Was it because he was so perfectly sure of Sally or because his passion lacked the vitality that brews both hate and love?

He had sipped less than an inch from his tall glass and smoked less still from his long cigar when a new group, lingering in the foyer, close enough for him to have touched them had the glass partition not intervened, caused him first to crane his neck, then to rise in his chair like a jousting knight. There was no doubt about it—there, next the glass partition, stood the familiar green gown with girdle and shoulder straps of gold.

Buddy realized that there might be other green gowns, other golden girdles; yet unequipped though he was to rival M. Poiret as a male dressmaker he would have wagered all the money that New York hadn't taken away from him that in modelling, texture, character that gown beyond the glass partition was the very one that had charmed him at the servants' ball.

The wearer was standing with her straight, slender back toward him at the time; but by glancing a few inches above the nape of her graceful neck he got the one detail of her costume that clinched his assurance. Round her dark glossy hair she was wearing an emerald bandeau. No doubt in the world now; it was the marquise, that lovely French enchantress who had promised to meet him anywhere he said and whom he had so basely deserted after his meeting with Terry Overbeek. Then after all she must be a lady of quality, just as she had said. Otherwise she would not be dallying round the lobby of Florio's, so very much at

case. It occurred to Buddy that he owed her an apology, if nothing more.

He was hesitating on the brink of action when a well-looking young man of her party came forth with her evening wrap and began draping it over her shoulders. Her head had been turned away up to that moment, but she came halfway round now and gave the spy full benefit of her profile. The shock sent Buddy bumping back into his chair.

It wasn't the mysterious Frenchwoman, but some one vastly more puzzling: It was the girl pickpocket who had robbed him on the D. & R. G.

There was no doubt about it. Buddy got nearly a minute of gazing into her frank smiling face, so successfully masking its duplicity and guile. When she laughed she showed pretty teeth, and her violet eyes glistened with wholesome fun. Oh, women, women! And her victim tonight was the same young man he had seen riding round with her in the hansom cab!

As soon as her wrap was adjusted against her pretty neck her party, of which there were two or three young people and two older ones, moved toward the revolving door. Buddy McNair swore aloud and started in pursuit. He had been Manhattan's pawn too long. This woman shouldn't escape him now.

It was something of a journey round the glass partition and into the lobby. By the time he had gained the entrance outside he saw a heavy limousine just swinging into Fifth Avenue.

"Stop that car!" howled Buddy to the carriage man.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" inquired the official.

"I don't want my pardon begged. I'm all fed up on pardons. But why didn't you stop that car?"

"It was already started, sir."

"You're a genius!" snorted Buddy, and stamped back into the little dining room.

"Germain," he asked of the captain of waiters, "what's the name of that young lady in the green dress who just went out?"

"I wasn't looking, Mr. McNair," said Germain, "but I can find out perhaps."

Presently he came back with florid Jacques, the head waiter.

"The dinner party was given by Mr. Grey, of Boston," said Jacques. "Mr. Inverness Grey, I'm not sure I have ever seen the young lady in green before. Mr. Grey stays at the Yacht Club when he is in the city."

Buddy gulped his drink and went his way, ruminating over his half-smoked cigar. As he called a taxicab he reflected that he owed it to society in general and to Mr. Inverness Grey in particular to give the alarm as to the second young lady in the green dress. What in the world was the significance in this costume? Was it the uniform of a gang of society pickpockets operating among the rich?

At half-past twelve, after Jass had prepared his tub and laid out his pyjamas, he decided to call up the Yacht Club.

"No, sir," said a positive voice at the telephone; "Mr. Inverness Grey is not stopping here. Yes, sir. Any mail sent here will be forwarded."

XVIII

AFTER his disguised betrothal feast next evening Buddy took his party to the theatre, feeling more and more that success had failed to bring him all it should. He had snatched only a moment alone with his fiancée that day. She had slept late in the morning, had departed for luncheon when he called her up about noon, was busy with her maid late in the afternoon when again he telephoned. She had come to Buddy's dinner an instant early; and his one moment had been in the library, when she had permitted him to gather her into his arms, pearls and all. But she had seemed quite out of temper, had complained of being tired, of losing at bridge, of detesting her friends. It hurt him to think that she should have brought so ill a mood to this occasion.

"I'm glad you wore the pearls to-night," he said thankfully, just before the others came in.

"Your pearls, my dear!" she whispered, and the significance of it improved his spirits tremendously.

The dinner had been pleasant after a fashion. The wine—some of which Buddy had inherited from Sagan Rae's stock—was good, as Plummie Van Laerens attested in a spell of candid inebriation. Gertie quarrelled with him as usual, and when Sally attempted to conciliate them turned upon her and spoke bitingly of Prince Carlo.

"Buddy," she implored, "try to woo her away from that greasy old thing!"

Sally, far from offended, gave Buddy one swift glance.

"I'm all out of practice with a gun," Buddy confessed. "But he's a broad target and slow moving."

They were quite late, of course, to Noisy Nettie, the Broadway success they had arranged to see. The curtain had just fallen on the pink cabaret scene, and the others had gone ahead down the aisle; Mrs. Dyvenot, removing her opera cloak, was beseeching Buddy to do something with it when a neat-figured man with a pepper-and-salt mixture in his dark curls came face to face with them in the aisle.

It was Terry Overbeek. Anybody could see that the meeting was purely accidental; but the encounter, which was over in a flash, imparted the sinister impression of an attack deliberately planned.

Overbeek had been drinking. There were fiery rims round his pale eyes and the flesh on his jowls seemed to have slipped down a quarter of an inch. Buddy saw him first and was making a gesture to guide Mrs. Dyvenot out of the way when she too saw him. Never before in Buddy's observation had she lost her poise. Her face blanched with a look of fright; and there was something else—humiliation. And yet Overbeek's eyes never met hers. Nothing he could have said could have been more obvious than his look. It was taking in her necklace, counting every pearl on the string. It was a pawnbroker's look. And after she had scurried down the aisle he still stood there leaning against a pillar, on his lips such a smile of wise wet humour as never old Silenus smiled.

"How are you, McNair?" he sang out jauntily and slouched away.

When Buddy had joined his party on the fourth row, centre aisle, Mrs. Dyvenot was rippling with sprightly humour. There were telltale spots on her cheeks, but ~~she~~ was all animation, playing the game again with all her

might. She was down in the orchestra circle, having descended from Olympus to the human level, and the contact seemed to have a stimulating effect. In fact Buddy could not but see in all these people of his party a tendency to perform for the multitude, to be noticed by the mob they so conscientiously affected to despise.

"Sit still, Plummie!" demanded Gertie Van Laerens. "You shouldn't be drumming like a child."

"He simply can't wait for the bathing scene in the second act," explained Sally with one of her naughty twinkles.

"Bringing women to a musical show is like shipping rhinestones to Kimberley," objected Plummie with a long-toothed grin.

"Men are amused by poor baggage indeed," sniffed Mrs. Bitnor, which caused her somewhat chinless husband to whinny.

"The baggage who stands second from the end isn't so poor," suggested Plummie, who had seen Noisy Nettie three times.

The populace on adjoining rows were craning curious necks for a glimpse of royalty being democratic. The second-act curtain went up on the bathing scene and Bitnor said something extremely comic to Plummie Van Laerens, who snorted so boisterously as to cause the orchestra leader to look round, scowling—until he saw who had caused the disturbance. Then he smiled apologetically.

It was a good show, Buddy thought. He always preferred the weary merchant's choice in the matter of dramatic entertainment. But he was worried and he had a telepathic knowledge that Sally was worried too. He reached out and touched her hand once, but she drew it gently away. Buddy felt like the little twig in the midst of the whirlpool—everything circling wildly round him,

nobody knowing why; himself the centre of many curious agitations, all tending to draw him suddenly under. The relations between the two mysterious girls in the green dress, one of whom he knew to be a swindler, the other of whom he had reasons to suspect; the eloquent sneer of Terry Overbeek, gazing after Sally's pearls; his own unsatisfying engagement to Mrs. Dyvenot, and her unexplained relations with the world at large—questions, questions, questions!

In the midst of Noisy Nettie's most hilarious scene Mrs. Dyvenot leaned toward him and whispered: "I'm frightfully tired, Buddy. Won't you take me home?"

Poor Buddy's heart leaped up again. In her appeal he thought he saw her ruse to be alone with him. Almost eagerly he made his excuses to the ladies of the party, then blankly he followed her up the aisle.

When the carriage man had whistled his car forth from a side street Buddy helped her in, and in perfect silence took his seat beside her. He anticipated a melting of the snows, a blossoming of loverlike confidences.

He slipped his arm along the back of the seat and held her stiffly. She was as unresponsive as a roll of cloth, and though she did not make a gesture of dissent it was obvious enough that she did not approve of the Fifth Avenue bus method of getting better acquainted.

"What's the matter, Sally?" he asked after a while, when he had assumed his conventional attitude.

"I'm frightfully tired."

"Can't you take a rest?"

"A rest! How in the world can I?"

"Why, just naturally lay off for a while."

"That's a delicious programme. I'm a slave—everybody's slave. My whole life is wasted on a pack of things I hate. Foolish backbitings and jealousies! And here I've wasted

my afternoon playing cards with people I loathe, and losing more money than I can afford to a woman who is nothing more nor less than a professional gambler."

Buddy was on the point of asking if her professional wore a green gown and a curious hair ornament, but he wisely desisted.

"I don't see why you can't stop a while and rest up."

"No. I suppose you can't."

This was a crusher. From his recent intimacy he found himself receding to a distance, regarding her as an astronomer regards his Venus—through a telescope.

When they had turned into Madison Avenue he looked at her piteously and asked: "Sally—is it something about Terry Overbeek?"

"What in the world has Terry Overbeek got to do with me?" she taxed him shrewdly.

The car stopped before the white entrance of the apartment house.

At the elevator she gave him her hand and forced a smile that seemed to twist every line in her face.

"I'll feel better in the morning," she said. "Come and take me out to lunch. And, my dear—don't have foolish ideas!"

Her weariness seemed to have infected him. Questions, questions, questions—their constant assault upon his confused brain was turning The Wild Man of the Mountain into an Ibsenian heart gnawer. Interrogation points buzzed round him like a swarm of bees which he strove vainly to beat away with his bare hands.

As soon as he had unlatched the door of his apartment he decided to go straight to bed. There was a light in the entrance hall, but the rest of the place was mysterious with darkness. This was queer. Possibly he had come

home a bit early and had caught the usually efficient Jass napping. He switched on the library lights and rang impatiently for his faithful servant.

"Is Jass welshing now?" he asked thunderously and, striding to his bedroom, set to the unaccustomed task of undressing himself. His pyjamas were nicely laid out, the coverlid turned down, a carafe of water and glass set thoughtfully on the stand. Was Jass in love? Buddy rang again, and after a vain wait for a response crept into bed and groaned the bitter fatigue of soul and body.

He left the bedlight burning, and from the small stand near by picked up a carefully tooled volume. It was a collection of Carlyle's essays, which he had selected from his new library as a bedtime book.

He turned at random to a page marked Goethe. This looked invitingly dull.

". . . For the rest, what sort of mind is it that has passed through this change, that has gained this victory; how rich and high a mind; how learned by study in all that is wisest, by experience in all that is most complex! . . ."

". . . For the rest, what sort of mind is it——"

The telephone rang. "Hello!"

"Mr. Overbeek calling."

"Say it again, slow."

"Mr. Overbeek calling."

"Terry Overbeek?"

"Yes, sir."

"Show him up."

Carlyle plumped heavily to the floor and Buddy's silken legs promptly followed.

XIX

BUDDY McNAIR'S feet were in red Morocco slippers and his pyjamas concealed under a brocaded robe as he turned the latch to admit Terrill Overbeek. The unexpected guest stood silhouetted in a square of light, a patch of fine linen showing in the opening of his short overcoat.

"You're a splendid host, Buddy—perfectly corking host!"

He shook hands almost affectionately as he came in, and under the bright light Buddy could see that he had not permitted his wine to die for lack of reinforcements.

"I haven't got on my war paint," said Buddy, "but I'm mighty glad——"

Overbeek slipped on the rug and Buddy caught him at a perilous angle.

"Damn that ice!" spluttered Terry. "You ought to have your man sprinkle a few ashes. Unsafe for pedestrians."

Buddy switched on the library lights and permitted his guest to slump into a soft chair by the table. Overbeek threw his hat on the carpet and struggled desperately to get out of his overcoat. Three years ago, when he had appeared in that elaborate hunting costume to shoot poor Romeo, Buddy had thought him a comic figure. To-night, in spite of his inebriation, there was a terrible comedy about him—the comedy of failure and tragic dissolution.

Buddy brought out a decanter and poured portions into small glasses. As soon as Overbeek had gulped the draft he made a wry face and said paradoxically, "Bally good stuff! That's some of Sagan Rae's 1812, I take it."

"I got part of his stock," explained Buddy, staring and wondering.

"Poor Sagan—won't need it any more. Living on sour milk and dog biscuits. Got him in a cage, with a nurse who teaches him to play blocks and say da-da. Rotten life that, living in sanitarium. Of course he won't need it any more."

As though that point were settled Overbeek reached again for the decanter, but made such a mess of it that Buddy hastened to refill the glass.

"Buddy," asked Overbeek after the second drink, "why won't you be a little more theatrical? Why don't you dangle the languid wrist and inquire, 'To what do I owe the pleasure of this midnight visit?'"

"That's just what I wanted to ask," confessed Buddy, grinning in spite of himself.

"But you don't know how, eh? Well, stick round with this crowd a while and spend a little more money than you can afford and you'll learn how to do anything"—he lurched forward on his elbow, his face becoming suddenly set and serious—"anything but how to be decent and useful and human."

Overbeek held his pale eyes on his vis-à-vis for a long minute.

"I'm not going to argue that point with you, Terry," Buddy informed him.

"I've been working nights for a long time," Overbeek went rambling on. "Hardest kind of work—what d'you call it?—keeping up with the dogs. But that doesn't mean that I'm not here with a fixed purpose. What would you say it was, Buddy? Give you three guesses."

"Love, courtship and matrimony," suggested Buddy, beginning to wonder if this shattered millionaire himself knew what he was here for.

"Be reasonable. Now I'm going to tell you something." Again that hard, serious expression came into his face as he leaned over. "You remember that favour I refused?"

"Yes—I sort of recollect it."

"Well, I haven't forgotten it. That's a vice with me—remembering. I wouldn't help you when you asked to be introduced to Sally Dyvenot—but now you've gone and done the job for yourself; and I'm here to save the bones."

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked Buddy McNair in his fighting voice.

"She's pecking rapidly, I can see. Trust old Sally."

"Do you know she's promised to marry me?"

Overbeek gave one bray of a laugh and pounded the table.

"Great Scott! Is it as bad as that?"

"Now look here, Overbeek—"

"Just a minute, just a minute!"

One of those slender hands went up in a gesture expressive of a sort of cynical power. To all appearances Overbeek had become perfectly sober.

"I noticed Sally wearing her—pearls—to-night," said he smoothly. "And I decided it was high time for me to do you that favour."

He held a match quite steady as he lit a cigarette before resuming:

"Of course I know a great deal more about you than you know. I pay well for my information, and I've been keeping a sort of guardianship over you. For instance, that matter of your paying nearly a quarter of a million for those pearls—"

"Ghost of Great Henry!" gasped the man from Axe Creek. "When did you find that out?"

"About two days after your check went through the clearing house."

"Well," declared Buddy defiantly, "I don't suppose there's any law against my buying a necklace, even if it was just like the Overbeek pearls."

"Just like them?" drawled Overbeek. "My dear fellow, what you bought *were* the Overbeek pearls!"

There came a pause, during which Buddy McNair went over and took some brandy on his own account.

"Would you please say that again?" he asked gently.

"You simply bought the Overbeek necklace back from Twillaway's, paid the price Sally Dyvenot had put on it—then turned right round and presented the necklace to her."

"Say, boy, you're crazy!" croaked Buddy, mushing into his chair. "The Overbeek pearls were lost in front of the Metropolitan Opera House. I saw her wearing them half an hour before she lost 'em."

"Not the Overbeeks—she wasn't wearing them," persisted Overbeek like the tolling of a bell. "And she never lost the Overbeek necklace."

"What is the man driving at?" asked Buddy, not at all sure he hadn't gone to sleep over Mr. Carlyle and dreamed a bad dream.

"I'll have to explain—make it simpler." His head swayed slightly and the silly look came back into his eyes. "Pardon me if I ramble—I'm a little drunk myself. You've got to make allowances for Sally Dyvenot—way she was raised. I made allowances for her over two years. And look at me now! She'll lie crooked in her coffin, that woman. I imagine I'd have married her if I hadn't found out how she'd divorced Pat Dyvenot. Still in love with the bounder; wanted to get hold of my money to spend on Pat. Of course there may be a worse lot in New York. Seems queer, though, for a stranger in town to have picked up—"

"Damn you!" shouted Buddy McNair, springing up and

shaking the vilifier back into the present. "What pearls did she lose if she didn't lose the Overbeeks?"

Overbeek had again raised the soft hand of annoyance.

"Sit down, Buddy, and let me talk."

And when Buddy had made the best of his torment Terry went smoothly on in his sober voice:

"Sally's been living on from pillar to post ever since we found we couldn't make a go of it. She plays cards pretty well and has a half brother in the interior-decorating line—but everybody is supposed to know how she can travel on the ragged edge and be accepted everywhere. But she's been running into debt like a wild horse. All this time she hung on to my pearls. It must have been a cruel wrench when she got rid of them."

"Got rid of them?"

"That's the cream of the story. It cost me some time and trouble to get this information. But it seems that her dressmaker had been stung twice at about that time, and Mrs. Dyvenot's account was becoming a valuable antique. One day a pert collector got into her apartment and threatened no end of a row. . . . By Jove, old boy, that's excellent brandy!" Buddy's hand was as shaky as his guest's when he refilled the little glass.

"Well, Sally wasn't going to see herself bawled out as a bankrupt. She decided to kiss the Overbeek necklace good-bye; so she marches round to Eidelstein's, where they make a business of imitating pearls, and there she has the necklace reproduced in cheap stuff. For three or four hundred dollars Eidelstein can imitate any pearl so well that the Mother of Pearls couldn't tell the difference. Then Sally sneaks over to Twillaway's and makes a secret deal with the pearl salesman to break up the real string and sell it in small lots. She had to pay that dressmaking per-

son—all together she was in a rotten bad corner, you know."

A sickening humiliation came over Buddy McNair. He swore that Overbeek lied, and the more fiercely he protested the more wildly did he suspect that those drunken lips were telling the truth.

"She wore the imitations round for a few days—letting people get used to them, don't you see?" Overbeek's manner had become rather lightly discursive. "But the collector from the dressmaker got impudent again. I got this from him straight—threatened to take her pearls for the bill. That was just what Sally didn't want—getting those phony pearls into hostile hands and having it come out that she was wearing imitations. That would have spilled the beads jolly well for Sally!"

"And you're trying to make out that Sally—Mrs. Dyvenot—accidentally lost the imitations and let them be advertised as the genuine?"

"Accidentally—on purpose." Overbeek allowed one lid to droop and lie dead for a moment over his fishy eye. "She could advertise the pearls as lost; her dressmaker couldn't compel her to give up what she didn't have. And in the general excitement Twillaway's could have time to sell the Overbeek necklace and turn the money over to her. But in the midst of this neat little plan Sally struck such a good thing as only happens once in a lifetime."

"Meaning me?" asked Buddy.

"Rather! Not only did you come along and pay her agents two hundred and twenty-five thousand for the necklace but you made her a present of it—a present of it!" Overbeek put back his head and laughed and laughed. "Best game she ever played—both ways from the ace and win on both ends! Made her a present of it!"



"BUDDY, MY BOY, WE'RE BROTHERS-IN-LAW IN SORROW.
GO BACK TO AXE CREEK. YOU'LL BE SAFER, LIVING WITH
THE WILD BEARS AND THE RANK CYANIDE."



"What's the name of the insane asylum where they took Sagan Rae?" the victim inquired in a crushed tone.

"We'll go together—make it a twosome," invited Terry, his face again drooping to its leer.

"I don't believe a word of it," roared Buddy, anger surging again.

"That's good."

And he began to sing something about the weather when birds of a feather get together.

"I'll talk to her to-night," raved the man in torment. "I'll get the truth out of her."

"Buddy, you can talk to her a thousand and one nights and hear the same number of Arabian yarns," he cackled. "But you'll never get the truth out of her. It isn't in her. Buddy, my boy"—he swayed to his feet, and leaning over laid his hand on the drooping shoulders—"Buddy, my boy, we're brothers-in-law in sorrow. I want to tell you something—go back to Axe Creek. You'll be safer living with the wild bears and the rank cyanide. Why in the world did you ever come here? I've had to travel round with that circus because I was born under the main tent. I used to know plenty of real people, but they'll have nothing to do with me now—nothing but the circus set will endure me. They spoiled me and they've got me. What's the use of your spending brains and money and health on us? We're rotten, we're tin-panny. We're spoiled by a lot of newspaper claptrap; we're about as dignified as a Punch and Judy show. Get out, Buddy! Find a healthy, sensible, middle-class girl; marry her and be real. Marry a woman who isn't afraid to raise children at the breast. Good night."

Tears were coming strangely out of the fishy eyes and Buddy found himself shaking hands with the man.

"I—I wish you'd look me up," Overbeek was faltering as Buddy led him to the elevator and rang the bell.

"I will—perhaps," promised the man from Axe Creek. "If your story's true I'm off for Axe Creek to-morrow morning. If it isn't I'll look you up all right—with a gun. And what I gave Romeo won't be a patch of snow on what you'll get."

"I'll have a large target embroidered on my overcoat," promised Overbeek as he floundered into the elevator.

XX

BUDDY rang her up twice that night, and twice was informed by a sleepy maid that Mrs. Dyvenot had given orders that she should not be disturbed by any one. It was after three in the morning when he made his second appeal; he had lost all track of time. He went round his apartment, turning on all the lights, aimlessly inspecting the art objects which Half Brother Charles had so thoughtfully provided, at a proper commission. The whole thing had been nicely arranged to give an effect of aristocratic lineage. By a look round the place you would have thought that Buddy McNair had inherited household fixtures from any number of generations of several nationalities. Great cloisonné vases on a battered Florentine mantel; eight or ten splendid prints, attributed at least to Hokusai; wall coverings of old Venetian textile; a medallioned Chinese rug on the floor.

Mrs. Dyvenot had never lost interest so long as he was spending money at her suggestion. Buddy thought of this several times, then condemned himself for the unworthy thought. Being a true American he disbelieved in hanging on circumstantial evidence; and it is hard to find an American jury that will hang a woman on any evidence whatsoever. The chances were that Overbeek—and it was easy to see how he had deteriorated during the past two or three years—had gone wild with drinking, was babbling on the verge of delirium tremens. More possibly still, he was attempting to use Buddy McNair as an instrument with which to avenge an ancient wrong. No, Romeo's fate

wouldn't be a patch of snow on what Terry would get if that outrageous story proved untrue.

He wandered into his library and went over the rows upon rows of vellum-bound volumes, all in beautiful sets, which he used only as bedtime sedatives. The taste of stale liquor was still in his mouth. Everything filled him with disgust, gave him an impression of contemptible ugliness. So this was what he had been digging for all those humble years, burning his fingers with acid, rummaging in the mud of Axe Creek. He had sweat out the secret of turning mud into gold; with what unworthy ease that gold was going back into the mud!

Of course this was only part of the nightmare. He would see Sally in the morning and have it over with. She could straighten it out with a word or two; and then he would have Wing's pearl handled six-shooter oiled for proper action against the slanderer who had implied foul things against a woman's name. What had he meant by that reference to Pat Dyvenot—"she's still in love with the bounder"? What did everything mean in this mad game he had entered, a child and a novice?

Toward dawn Buddy began taking it out on poor Jass. Repeatedly he rang his valet's bell, hoping against hope that the faithless one had returned and could be bullied into bringing him a cup of coffee. The ghastly apartment merely echoed. With two or three picturesque expressions that he had learned from Shaggy Keenan he charged through the little white door at the end of the hall and into Jascomb's bedroom. The modest place was as immaculate as Jass himself and quite in keeping with his perfect valetry. Over his neatly laid bed hung portraits of the royal George and the equally royal Mary. On the bureau, amid a few simple toilet articles, stood a photograph of a sweet-faced English girl, with the inscription "From Lydia to H.

Jascomb." There was a British quietude about it all, a lack of this hurly-burly which was driving him mad. Over Jascomb's trunk were numerous other photographs, mostly of noble hunting parties gathered on lawns of great country houses. The survey brought to Buddy a certain calm—it was all so English, so settled, so free from worry.

In his abnormally excited state he had visions of himself—under Jascomb's protection and guidance—escaping to England, there to close his days.

At last he went to sleep in a library chair and was awakened by the machine-gun snarling of shade rollers in operation. Jascomb, haggard but compliant, moved stealthily about, making a pretence of not seeing his master's shockingly unconventional behaviour.

"Well?" asked Buddy, after staring a long time.

Jascomb jumped.

"Yes, sir."

"You're human, after all," concluded his master.

"I should like to explain, sir," the slave apologised. "It's quite an unusual story."

"If you tell me an unusual story at this stage of the game I'll lynch you."

"Yes, sir."

"I want a cold bath, a shave, a hot towel, a massage, three fried eggs, a cup of coffee, a clean shirt and immediate action."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want you to go back to the kitchen and throw the almighty wrath into Jenny Anderson. Tell her the star boarder's home and mad. Move, Jass! Start the mill!"

It was barely half past nine when Buddy, having breakfasted, arrived at the brownish-brick apartment house just off Madison Avenue.

"Does Mrs. Dyvenot expect you, sir?" asked the other Jass at the door.

"Get out of my light!" The man, despite his superiority in inches, stood aside and permitted the invader to charge upon the elevator.

He faced the surprised maid at Mrs. Dyvenot's door, and he was well inside the apartment before he gave his instructions:

"Tell Mrs. Dyvenot I'm calling."

"She isn't up, Mr. McNair," faltered the scared servant

"Tell her I'll wait."

He waited in a comfortable chair facing the pygmy grand piano, upon which his own photograph, taken by a fashionable photographer and artfully framed, stood smilingly next to the portrait of fat Carlo of Bulgaria. In that bitter moment Buddy saw himself as one of a rogue's gallery of suitors. Why hadn't she labelled them all with numbers and hung them in a row somewhere where the world could stare and have its laugh?

She came in sooner than he had expected. It was apparent that she had slept well, for her complexion was as bright as a girl's; and there was something girlish, too, about the simple gown she wore. He must have presented a ghastly appearance, for she paused when she saw him and her face took on that fleeting look of fear he had seen there last night when she faced Terry Overbeek in the theatre aisle.

"Buddy, my dear!" she cried with more warmth than she had ever before shown to him—and before he realised what she would do she had come over and thrown her arms round his neck.

"You poor child, what's the matter?" she was asking in his ear.

He unwound her arms and stood away.

"Sally," he began gruffly, "a man came to me last night and told me a pack of lies about you. I want you to help prove they're lies so that I can go out and finish the snake."

"Of course. But, Buddy, you've worked yourself up into a fearful state. You can't afford to take idle stories so seriously. Who came to you?"

She was smiling now as she motioned him toward the couch and sat beside him.

"Terry Overbeek," he announced.

"You're going to attack my character on the word of Terry Overbeek?"

"I'm not attacking your character, Sally. I'm defending it; and I want to hear the truth from you."

"What does he say?"

Her eyes, narrowed to hazel slits, were fixed on the point of her shoe.

"In the first place he charges that you never lost the Overbeek pearls."

"He's capable of that. What did I lose, in his opinion?"

"He says that you purposely lost a set of fakes to throw your creditors off the track while you had the real Overbeek necklace up for sale."

"I had no idea poor Terry was a dime novelist. Could you believe such fiction, Buddy?"

"No. But he hates you, Sally, and he's going to spread that story round New York with variations, telling how a green Westerner was bunked into buying the Overbeek pearls and handing them back to you——"

At this point in the encounter Buddy's attitude was almost apologetic. He could see how frightfully he was offending her.

"And you believe it?"

Her mysterious eyes were still upon the shoe tip.

"Not a word! I know it's a damned lie and I'm willing

"Well then, will you permit me to bring Twillaway's man here?"

"I most certainly shall not!"

She had backed a little farther toward the wall, and despite her freezing demeanour there was something that told Buddy that another moment might find her in tears.

"Sally, I wish you'd be sensible," he urged in a gentler tone. "This is a matter that can't wait. If you'd ever be candid perhaps I might know your motive for doing things. Won't you at least tell me what's your objection to having those pearls examined?"

"Not to-day, not to-day!"

Her hazel eyes were wider open than he had ever seen them before, and she was making a futile attempt to hide her treasure in a fold of her gown.

"Right now—at once!"

The command came rough and stern out of his dry throat. She had temporised and evaded once too often. The Wild Man had come out of his mountain and for a moment was a terrible thing. A killing rage had hold of him, and it was fortunate that he took it out on the necklace.

"What are you doing—you little bounder?"

It came like the spit of an angry cat. He was aware now that he had grasped a segment of the swinging necklace, had wound it round his hand and was exerting his strength to snatch it from her. She was not pretty to see as she stood there, her lips drawn down at the corners, her teeth showing as she exerted all her hate to pull away the loop which he so stubbornly retained. It was not a dignified exhibition, this picture of two beings suddenly reduced to primitive methods of exchange. All kindness and forbearance had left his heart; a realisation of her guilt had come flooding over him. There followed a mighty wrench

—and the inevitable had occurred. The catgut cord broke, and a half hundred pearls went scattering like beans to the four corners of the room.

At the moment of catastrophe they stood apart, she fiercely indignant, he flushed and already repentant.

"Excuse me, please!" he was begging. "I didn't know what I was doing. I'll gather them up for you and—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" she fairly ground out through her teeth. "You'll leave my house at once!"

"Is that final?" he asked, as she stood there, pale as death, the remnant of her necklace over her arm.

"Yes. I never want to see you again, you underbred little cattle dealer. Go away from me! At once—do you hear? At once!"

"Just a minute."

Kneeling down he began to gather pearls here and there across the carpet.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a voice that was all but a scream.

"Getting a sample," he said as he rose and clicked half a dozen in his pocket. "If Twillaway's satisfies me I'll come back and offer every apology in the world."

"No, you won't!" Her voice was now coarsely hysterical. "You'll never show your impudent peasant's face inside my door again."

"That's final," announced Buddy McNair; and he closed that forbidden door very softly behind him.

So this was the end of his golden adventure. At the sidewalk Buddy faintly ordered his chauffeur to drive him to Twillaway's. Something told him he would lack courage to see it through unless the affair were settled forthwith. What if the salesman should prove the case for Mrs. Dyvenot by showing that the pearls he carried loosely

clicking in his pocket were not identical with the Overbeek string, that she hadn't lied, that Overbeek had been working to defame an innocent woman? Even at that the golden adventure was done. No crawling on hands and knees, no lavishing of money would ever win her back to him. And Buddy McNair was in no mood to skin his knees again in her behalf.

At the pearl counter in Twillaway's there was nothing to be seen of their Mr. Shorewinkel's bald head. A brisk little man with snappy black eyes and a grey bang over his forehead came forward and explained that he was Mr. Craikie and that Mr. Shorewinkel was out of town.

"I guess you'll do," said Buddy, bringing the six loose pearls out of his pocket and clanking them on the show case. "Are you an expert?"

"I might be called so," the snappy black eyes modestly confessed. "I've been in charge of this department for several years."

"Well, I've got hold of these pearls and I'm anxious to know if they're from the Overbeek string—you know, the one that was lost."

"I know it very well," explained Mr. Craikie.

"If these pearls were on the string would you know them?"

"I'm quite certain I could tell if they were not," he said.

Mr. Craikie picked up two of the pearls and held them together under the light; then he gathered the four others, scrutinising them one at a time. He held them under a glass, squinting closely as he turned them slowly over. He went over them one at a time, and the most humorous of smiles lit up his face before he had come to the fourth. Finally he brought them back and clanked them all down on the show case.

"These aren't pearls at all," he announced with the same amused smile.

"Great Henry's mother! What are they—gooseberries?"

"Nothing so natural as gooseberries." The smile broadened to a grin. "They are excellent imitations—probably made to resemble the Overbeek pearls. You'll probably find they've been manufactured by Eidelstein."

"Well, somebody lied," objected the now perfectly stupefied Buddy. "I bought these here a few months ago and paid two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for the rope."

"Oh, you're Mr. McNair!" cried Mr. Craikie; then shook his grey bang and added: "I don't know how you got hold of these. They're most certainly not the ones you bought from us."

"Well, what did I buy from you, for heaven's sake?"

"You bought the original Overbeek pearls."

This scored heavily in favour of Terry's drunken revelations.

"I—I thought the Overbeeks were in possession of Mrs. Dyvenot," the victim feebly protested.

"I'm not supposed to know how they got into our hands," smiled the diplomat. "But you bought the original Overbeeks, with a few changes."

Buddy stood staring for a long time, not sure whether to laugh or to cry. He was quite dizzy. Possibly it was something he had eaten.

"Well, I'm much obliged for the information," he told the distant vision of Mr. Craikie swimming in the mist.

"Here are your—pearls," smiled that gentleman, having scraped the pretty beads together. "Would you be interested in comparing these imitations with the genuine Overbeek necklace?"

"It might be a pleasant pastime," was Buddy's crushed retort.

"It has been on sale all the week in the window of Stella & Zedlick, two blocks up the Avenue."

"You mean the Overbeeks have been on sale?" shouted Buddy into the whirling mist.

"Yes. The same string you bought here a few months ago."

It was obvious that Mr. Craikie was trying to make trouble for somebody.

"But who's trying to sell 'em now?"

"The owner, I suppose."

Buddy could not see his face, but he was sure he was smiling.

"I suppose."

Buddy McNair began weaving his way toward the outer world.

Admiration for Mrs. Dyvenot was reviving within him. But it was a new set of qualities in her which he now admired. Her genius for salesmanship quite outdazzled any light that had hitherto shone upon him from Venus, planet of vain things.

XXI

EVEN as the diminishing White Hope, having grown quite black and blue toward the close of the eighteenth round, hears distantly a voice tolling "Seven—eight—nine" as, struggling to his feet, he clutches dimly the padded post against which he leans, determined to take it standing, so Buddy McNair, having wilted against one of Twillaway's marble columns, faced Fifth Avenue and vowed that though defeated he would die with his boots on.

Of course there was nothing now but retreat. There would be an evening train for Chicago, and so on to Axe Creek. That would be the simple, direct way out. He could arrange by letter with Pontius Blint to settle the sale of his New York belongings, and in that way he could silence his creditors for a while. Then there would be another big royalty coming to him in June.

The carriage man had whistled up his handsome blue town car with its shining brass on the hood and wire spoked wheels. As he got in and ordered his man to drive him round to the Brokers' Trust Company he was already including this car among his salable assets. This one and the touring car would probably total five thousand dollars, secondhand. He had a picture of his furniture and objects of art going under the hammer. Mr. Varden, the fashionable auctioneer, would probably advertise the sale and conduct it in his gallery, where Middleton Knox would occupy a front seat, indulging in a carnival of wit, to the chaste amusement of the Mighty Few.

When the car stopped Buddy McNair gazed stupidly on

interview Jass on the subject; and as soon as American affairs were properly disposed of they would be off for the old-world metropolis, where Jass would serve as his guide to gentility, where Buddy could make self-improvement his pastime, spending his days in the British Museum or attending lectures at the Royal Geographical Society. That was about all Buddy knew about London. But Jass—he knew!

Buddy turned the key to his apartment, the details of this new project intriguing him out of his despair. So absorbed was he, in fact, that he had gone half the length of his entrance hall before he became aware of male voices, angrily disputing. He stood stark still on the rug. The hallway being in semi-darkness he enjoyed the spy's advantage, for he could peer through the glass doors of the library and see his faithful Jass violently debating some point with an elderly chin-whiskered stranger who was taking his ease in Buddy's favourite chair, while his voice, of the rawest Middle-Western quality, clashed against Jascomb's carefully modulated tones.

"But, father," Jascomb's words dropped out of a lull, "how can I? I am established as an Englishman now."

"Englishman be durned!" came the nasal twang. "No-body took you for one nine years ago when you run away from South Bend and joined in with that high-falutin' English actor show."

"Well, I'm not in vaudeville any more," declared Jass. "I've gone to no end of trouble to learn the English manner, and it has given me excellent situations."

"Ain't that New York for you!" twanged the elder. "Spend nine precious years learnin' yourself to be a lackey—and proud of it."

"I am considered one of the very best in my profession," boasted Jass with unwonted spirit. "In less than two years

I worked up from bus boy to the position of 'ouse valet in the 'Otel Merlinbilt."

"Where did you lose your h's?" snarled the father.

"I have carefully learned the manner," explained the son proudly. "My pronunciation has made me most valuable to the gentlemen I have served. Particularly Mr. McNair. Being a wealthy Westerner and none too particular in ordinary things he has seen fit to offer me a much 'andsomer salary than I could ever 'ave won by clarking in a South Bend 'ardware shop."

"Can you beat it!" sobbed Jass the elder.

"I dare say had I disclosed a disagreeable American accent he never would have considered me."

"I dare say he wouldn't. And now here's my proposition; take it or leave it. This one-horse hardware business you're so snippy about has swelled some. It's now Jascomb's Bazaar—carpets and linoleums on the fourth floor; go-carts, fishing tackle, ladies' notions and drugs on the third; cloaks, suits, boys' pants and musical instruments on the second; general dry goods, haberdashery and silverware on the first; household fixtures, hardware, paints, oils, varnishes, bathroom supplies and art department in the basement. Come back to South Bend and I'll put you in the way of becoming general manager—provided you take some sort o' gargle and get rid of that frog in your throat."

"Mr. McNair is quite satisfied with me as I am," quavered Jass.

"Well," twanged old Jascomb in his whining voice, "from what I gather, this McNair is about the damnedest fool—"

With an uncontrollable snort Buddy McNair leaped into his library, a great light in his eye, his right hand extended toward the astonished elder.

"Shake!" he cried. "You've certainly said something, Mr. Jascomb!"

"Oh, but Mr. McNair, sir!" fluttered Jass the younger. "There was no offence meant, I am sure."

"Nobody can offend me any more," acknowledged the beaten one. Then turning to the proprietor of the bazaar: "Did I understand you to say that you're trying to naturalise your boy?"

"Well, that was about the idea," said the old man.

"Take a cigar." Buddy opened a box and held it eagerly toward Mr. Jascomb. "Put half a dozen in your pocket—smoke 'em on the train. Don't be sore, Jass. I've almost decided to become an American myself. It'll be kind of hard at first, but we'll find it easier as soon as we get west of Pennsylvania."

"Do you mean, sir, that I am dismissed?" asked the valet in so frightened a tone that Buddy lost his heart to be cruel.

"Not necessarily. I'll be travelling under a freight car back West pretty soon maybe; and if you think I'll do better with a valet, come on."

"Thank you, sir."

"I really believe he likes being a flunky," sniffed Jascomb the elder.

"I have chosen my calling, if I might say so," admitted Jass with equal deference to father and master.

"How in Sam Hill did you learn it?" asked Buddy, lost in the admiration of true art. "You certainly didn't learn the language in South Bend."

"No, sir-ree!" shouted Jass the elder. "Not while the fire department's working. He got it off them English actors, that's where he got it!"

"You see, sir," Jass volunteered, "I elected to follow the styge at an early date, so I left South Bend and en-

gaged myself to a company of British jugglers, carrying plates for two quid a week and expenses. At the end of the year one of the troupe, a clever chap named 'Igginson, got jolly well done in with an Indian club. When he got out of 'ospital he went on the road with a vaudeville sketch entitled *The Late Lord 'Amwex*, myself appearing as valet at a three-guinea salary—merely a styge valet, sir, but I gained much valuable information.

"Presently I obtained a situation with no less a person than Sir 'Edgerowe Keepe, acting as his man both on styge and off. At Liverpool Sir 'Edgerowe dismissed me out of hand, quite without a character. I learned very fast there, what with attending gentlemen at rather a smart club—"

"He's regular proud of it!" groaned the South Bend department store proprietor, looking wryly at his changeling son.

"Why shouldn't he be?" demanded Buddy. "He's a darned good valet. As a matter of fact, I shouldn't wonder if Americans would make the best valets in the world if they went in for it."

It was a great surge of patriotism which prompted this remark.

"You wouldn't say, sir, that I 'aven't earned my salary," Jass ventured.

"I never could—not on my deathbed. You've made a darned sight bigger success of New York than I have. At least hard work and perseverance have turned you into what you set out to be—"

Buddy permitted himself to say no more for fear that once on his favourite subject he would go raving mad.

"Well, Mr. Jascomb"—he held out his hand to the bearded stranger, who was an elderly picture of his son, plus character—"if you're staying long in New York, why don't you take a room here? There's lots of it."

"Thanks very kindly, mister," acknowledged the old man.
"But I'll be draggin' Henry away this afternoon."

"Drag away," invited Buddy. "And say—if there's another job waiting round your store I wish you'd wire me."

His abrupt exit from the apartment justified the elder Jascomb in his estimate of Buddy's standing among the fools of the world. For the old gentleman little knew what Buddy had endured and how the revelation that even Jass was a counterfeit had moved him to the point of a laughter that scorches away tears.

Buddy McNair hadn't much idea where he was going. The brute facts of life seemed to be gadding him from behind, bidding him run faster and faster. He was the little dog that had lost its master and was taking it out in trotting back and forth, barking feebly, its tongue hanging loose, madness snapping at its heels.

He disdained the chauffeur, who so subserviently opened the door of his limousine as he came to the sidewalk. He wanted to walk more, to exhaust himself to the point of sleep. Acquaintances saluted him in vain as he tramped down Fifth Avenue, prodding the point of his horn-tipped cane in the hard, resounding pave. His eyes were set ahead of him, and the word that was whirling through his head was "Phony, phony, phony!"

He wished the noise would stop.

In the lower Fifties a vision of old Mr. Jascomb came to him, and he could hear his whining voice denouncing him as the damnedest fool. And Buddy, giving himself up to a fit of uncontrollable laughter, leaned against a lamp-post and held his aching sides. A policeman, swaying ponderously by, stopped and took a look at him. Buddy passed on.

Somewhere farther along he stopped before a black-marble front whose window displayed a crown collection

of jewels on a little velvet platform which was, in turn, inclosed in a gilt-legged cabinet of cut glass. Instinctively Buddy clicked the six false pearls, which were rolling like so many marbles in his side pocket. He glared morbidly at the genuine articles on display. In the centre of the exhibit, effectively surrounded by huge sapphires, emeralds and diamonds, a great string of pearls coiled round its velvet hummock. He regarded them with hateful curiosity. How he longed to wreck the window and throw that fearful collection into the street, to be scattered under the ever-rolling tires!

Instead he held his hand idly in his side pocket. Like the undiscovered criminal he was reviewing the evidence of his crime. For there in the centre of the pretty show case was undoubtedly the Overbeek necklace, which Mrs. Dyvenot had again put up for sale.

He glanced up at the gilt-inlaid sign beside the door. Stella & Zedlick—this was the place where Twillaway's salesman had recommended his going to compare the hoax with the genuine article.

Ninety-two. He counted them all carefully; and then he brought out his six pretty beads and held them up, glancing swiftly from the window to the worthless trifles in his hand. How often he had seen Mrs. Dyvenot, herself a perfect imitation, posing calm and queenly, her neck encircled by the shining fakes. The first night he had seen her at the opera she had been wearing fakes! And what a treasure beyond price he had thought her, leaning there, her beautiful arm against the velvet railing!

Fakes!

This was what Buddy McNair had found in women—skin of glowing allurement over a foundation of cheap clay. Venus in the East—dazzling with false promises, shedding a specious light in the wrong quarter of the

heavens. The girl on the train who had picked his pocket after an hour's acquaintance; the decorative apish Miss Blint with her vile snobbery; Mrs. Dyvenot, who had sold him out time after time and looked like an angel while she did it!

Oh well, Buddy had paid his tuition fee. In his hand he held the false pearls, by way of diploma from the hard school that had graduated him.

"Worth about six dollars!" he grunted and had closed his fingers over the hateful lot, fired with the idea of hurling them into the street, when a feminine voice at his elbow exclaimed: "In the name of goodness, where did you come from?"

Buddy turned and stared, as well he might. She was tall and slender, and there were red feathers in her hat. In fact, she was the girl he had met on the train!

In the palsy of confusion he attempted to click the six imitation pearls back into his side pocket, but one of them missed its mark and clattered down to the pavement. He stood helpless, gaping as she leaned over, caught the glowing bead in her glove and restored it to him. In her merry blue eyes there was something of the same quizzical expression he had seen on the day he had blushed upon her through a snowbank of talcum powder.

Her mouth was curled to a frank and boyish smile. And this was too much for Buddy McNair, who languidly contemplated calling a policeman—but Fifth Avenue was beginning to swim round, much as Twillaway's had done.

He bared his head and tried to speak.

"I've been looking for you all over the known world," she cried, coming a step forward.

"Looking—what for?"

"What do you suppose?"

Her eyes were snapping as she gazed down—even in his condition Buddy was aware of her superior height.

"I'm not guessing any more," said he in a sick voice.

"Why, silly—to give it back, of course!"

"Give what back?" he echoed like an idiot.

"Your money."

"Great Henry's uncle!"

Buddy McNair found himself taking a high dive into a vast calm sea. Down, down, down—everything under him was gone. It was rather pleasant. He realised that she was holding him up by a limp arm.

"You're ill," he heard her saying distantly.

He was too weak to tell her he was merely suffering from shock. Somebody in New York was trying to give him back his money!

As soon as he had taken sufficient deep breaths to clear his head and had assured her that he was quite all right again he found her urging in her natural enthusiastic way: "Please don't let's waste a minute. I want to get it back to you before you fly again to the moon—or wherever you've been keeping yourself."

"Call it the moon," said Buddy faintly, "and I guess you've about located it."

She was swinging in her easy stride down Fifth Avenue, and Buddy had to stretch his legs in order to keep up with her. Given a chance to think it over he was not quite sure of her innocence, even now. He had learned but an hour ago how devious women can be, how plausible, how deft to snatch gold out of the hot crucible without scorching their pretty fingers. It was well within the range of possibility that this female, whose name he knew not, was at this very moment about to shear him for a second time.

His mind discoloured by such thoughts, he took her in

with many a sidelong glance. She gave the appearance of a wholesome air-loving American girl. No trace of barbed eyebrows or passion for late hours with fat foreign princelings. She walked with the suggestion of a stride, and the swing of her slender shoulders hinted at good muscle beneath a graceful surface.

"If I ever talk to a stranger again without asking his name the very first minute—dad says I'm dreadful about that—and I don't know yours yet!"

"Gilbert Kernochan McNair, of Axe Creek, Colorado," panted Buddy, struggling to keep up.

"That's it—Axe Creek! I'm a perfect half-wit when it comes to names. How I've searched the atlas, raked the guidebooks for that town!—telegraphed and written to the post masters of Hatchet Canyon, Tomahawk River, Spearhead Gulch, every Western town on the map with a dangerous name—paged you from Dan to Beersheba."

"How could you have paged me, not knowing my name?" was Buddy's natural question.

"I asked for the dimpled gentleman in the wholesale drug business."

"In the which business?" he queried, puzzled, though duly flattered as to the dimples.

"Wholesale drug—didn't you tell me you were engaged in a mill full of some sort of deadly poison?"

"Wow!" roared Buddy, slapping his knee. "That's a new one on the Supercyanide!"

"My name's Harrison," quoth she with some dignity after that. "Martha Harrison."

"How do you do, Miss Harrison?"

He removed his hat, as the occasion seemed to demand. All this time he was glancing left and right, fully determined not to be surprised should plausible members of her

gang come sauntering up with any fantastic plan under the sun.

"You must have had a sweet opinion of me all this time!" she volunteered with one of her wholesome giggles.

Nobody he had met in his fashionable adventures seemed to laugh like that, so it was natural he should ask, "Live in New York, Miss Harrison?"

"More than most people," she replied.

He wished she hadn't said that. It savoured of the enigmatical, and he was jaundiced with enigmas. He was perfectly sure that should this adventure turn out wrong he would become openly violent, run amuck with a gun or commit something more Western than the most desperate scenario writer ever dared devise. Fool that he was he found himself yearning toward this dubious acquaintance, longing to be generous with his confidence as he had been during their so short and so calamitous an intimacy on the train.

"You must have thought me a precious specimen," she repeated.

Upon this speech she stopped; and with her feet stopped Buddy's heart, because she was actually turning in at the entrance of the Fifth Avenue Bank.

They were within touching distance of great sums of money, and no wary confederate had joined her as yet.

"Well, I've seen you twice since I came to town," he confessed. "I had a sort of notion that maybe you were some sort of lady robber."

"Where did you see me?" she asked, her animation renewed.

"Once you were wheeling down the Avenue in a cab with a young man. Another time you were coming out of the dining room at Florio's."

"Why didn't you stop me—call a policeman or something?"

"I tried to," he explained; whereat she sent up such peals of mirth that he glanced nervously round, fearful that all Fifth Avenue would join in.

"Well, come right in."

She gave the invitation cordially, as though the bank belonged to her. He followed in her wake, saw her lean against a writing shelf, choose a counter check from the rack, dip a thoughtful pen, then stand reflective, gnawing its end.

"I think I'll give it back," she said, "in just the form I found it."

"I don't see anything the matter with your cheque," he protested, faith renewed.

"How can you tell?" she smiled. She was now writing busily. "You only met me on the train, you know."

Presently she came back from the window carrying a bundle of new bills, and with an amateur's clumsiness she began counting them out into his hand.

"Twenty-two fives and five ones," he acknowledged in a dry voice, bunching them all together and cramming them into an inside pocket.

"Don't put them away like that or you'll lose them too," she warned; but Buddy was only half listening. She had actually given it back. And so many things had been returned to him in that rumpled mound of bills.

"And now do you think a little better of human nature?" she was asking with her friendly smile.

"Miss Harrison—I—"

He knew he was staring like an idiot. He was aware that his mouth was going, but no words would come. His tonsils seemed to have swollen enormously, and he was

sure that if he made another sound he would be bellowing like a schoolboy.

"Honest, I can't believe it!" he got out at last in a hoarse whisper.

"I must have put you to an immense inconvenience," she said contritely; "and I'm as sorry as I can be."

"You saved me from blowing it with the rest, that's all."

"As bad as that?"

"Much worse."

He stood looking at her so long that she must have begun to feel awkward under his stare, for she spoke as if to break the silence.

"You'll come to see me, won't you—let me tell you how all that foolishness came to happen?"

"I guess I will!" he blurted out; but that was not to be all. He had taken her hand and was shaking it inanely. When at last he realised that she was going away the sinking sensation came upon him again. He could have clung to the hem of her garment, begging her not to leave him to himself. It was pitiful to see how the city had broken him in these few months.

"Miss Harrison," he found himself stammering, "have you got anything particular to do?"

"Well, that's a question." She stood regarding him carefully.

"Because, if you haven't—well, this doesn't seem to be one of the days when it's good to be alone. Hardpan—I've struck it flat—I—if you really want to save a life—"

She bent upon him eyes that were almost maternal in their serious consideration before she asked: "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"I wish somebody could tell me. Maybe you can."

"When I saw you that day on the train you were hard as nails—you had a wonderful colour—when the talcum was

brushed off. You're entirely changed. I hardly recognised you. I don't say it isn't becoming, but——”

“Go ahead. I want to hear about myself.”

“You look a thousand years older and tireder. You must have been taking New York wrong——”

“That's it—seeing it from the wrong side.”

“Do you want to play this afternoon?”

“If I could actually—play!” he said huskily, looking away for fear she would know how close he had come to tears.

“This is a bully day for a loaf,” she cried.

“I'll tell you what let's do!” Almost at once he had bounded to the height of her enthusiasm. “First we'll go over to Tanquay's for a bite of lunch. Then I'll call my car and——”

“You'll do nothing of the kind,” she laughed. “What you need is fresh air.”

“We can motor out to some inn——”

“You're in my care now.” She pretended to be ever so stern with him. “It's the loveliest day spring ever made. I'm perfectly mad to go out to the Bronx Zoo and look at the animals. I always go once in the spring.”

“Then we're off. I'll call my car and——”

“I believe you'd want to play golf in evening clothes. No, thank you. If you're going with me it will be by the Third Avenue El. And I know the dearest little delicatessen store where we can get a picnic lunch in a paper bag.”

“Now there's an idea!” said Buddy McNair, and under convoy set out for the magic delicatessen and the enchanted El.

XXII

YOU'LL—you'll think me dreadful for what I did," Martha Harrison was telling Buddy McNair a few hours later, as soon as they had finished their delicatessen lunch on the stone bench by the seal's rock. They had wandered up from the El station to the colony of animal houses, which they had viewed thus far only from the outside. Somewhere in the offing a lion roared, a zebra brayed, a water bird whiffled; but Martha Harrison, it seemed, wasn't so much interested in zoölogical specimens as she had pretended to be.

"It was on the square, whatever you did," he generously informed her. He was looking into the honest depths of her eyes and gaining much comfort therefrom.

"Here's one dill pickle left," said she, fishing a salty trophy from the depths of the paper bag. "Will you eat it or shall I?"

"Take it all," he permitted; "but for heaven's sake don't keep me in suspense any longer. I've just got to know why you pinched my wallet and how you got away with it."

"It sounds like—like a scenario." She blushed, revealing a pretty display of apricot tints.

"I'm crazy 'bout 'em," he urged without explaining whether he referred to scenarios or blushes.

In the distance he could see a solitary royal crane stalking tall and disdainful over the rolling sward. From the roof of an animal house came a flutter and a shriek and the air was filled with patches of rainbow light as a great peacock—green, gold and electric blue dripping from

his comet's tail—flew down and swept across the asphalt. "Come on and 'fess up!" urged Buddy McNair with spring-time naiveté.

"It was just one of my father's nervous attacks," she said after a long pause. "It kept us in Colorado Springs until after snowfall and into the winter. You wouldn't think poor Dad was nervous; he's such a perfect old Diogenes—it was Diogenes, wasn't it, who never got nervous about anything except his tub? That's just the way with Dad. He becomes a perfect bear if it's half a degree too hot or too cold. Moms and I have threatened to divorce him two or three times when he's having one of his attacks. Well, this attack was a perfect beauty. One breakdown after another; and he was just learning to smile again and Moms was packing to go East when those horrid gamblers came to the hotel; and I'm perfectly sure they were to blame for Dad's relapse."

"Gamblers?" echoed Buddy, naturally enough.

"That's a nice question for you to ask!" she twitted. "There's no telling what they would have done to Dad—we had to drag him away from Monte Carlo once, and we know how far to trust him when he's bored—and Moms and I pounced on him just in time to save him from being very properly fleeced. It was easy to see that they were a gang of professional swindlers, and it took me about ten minutes to find out enough to hang the whole lot of them. But those horrid persons had no sooner gotten out of town than poor Dad had another collapse—this one was a regular earthquake—so Moms got him to bed and we prepared to live in the wilds for the rest of our lives like the Swiss Family Robinson.

"Frankly I was bored stiff; and when we'd got the dear old foolish darling tucked in, Moms came along with a telegram that made me quite delirious with joy. It was from

her lawyers saying that one of the family had to be in New York right away to attend to signing a lot of papers. Daddy couldn't go of course, and Moms couldn't leave Dad. So I volunteered to be a martyr—I think martyrs usually have something up their sleeves, don't you?—and the very next noon they packed me on the train, with Cora to chaperon me. Don't you love that? You remember how intelligent Cora was when the talcum turned you into a funny little snow man!"

Buddy blushed feinely and she went on:
"The trip was a great success until the train started.
When you got on I was terribly nervous."

"Thought I was the lone bandit?" he suggested with some pride.

"Egotist!" was all the satisfaction she gave him. "It wasn't you who disturbed me. But I began to notice the men in the drawing-room compartment. Two of them I'd never seen before; but the dark one and the little blond in the grey suit I recognised fast enough. They were the ones who had been after poor Dad with the wonderful card game. Then I saw you get on, looking so fresh and breezy and—pardon me—green in your pretty new suit—and when I saw you standing there like Pike's Peak or a splendid charlotte russe, beautifully frosted on top with Cora's powder, I could have wept in sympathy. I thought it was rather splendid of you to help Cora—"

"And I certainly did help some," he grinned, remembering the avalanche of toilet articles he had loosed across the car.

"But I liked the way you did it—you know what I mean. Cora isn't young and charming. There are always a number of handsome travelling gentlemen to help a well-complexioned girl under thirty-five."

"I didn't look at it that way," he stammered, immensely pleased.

"At any rate I had a peep at you across the aisle and made up my mind that you were some poor lonesome miner going for a week-end in Denver. You looked so homesick and pitiful—"

"You've said it!"

"And when I saw how fearfully careless you were with your wallet—you took it out twice, do you know?—you got dreadfully on my mind. They gave us the same table in the dining car, and it made me nervous when I realised that those four sharks were eating together across the aisle from us, and they had their eyes on you half the time. You see, I'd never travelled alone before and I'm a coward at heart. I wanted to warn you against those men and I had my mouth open two or three times, but I was frightened out of it.

"But after luncheon that sleek little man in the grey suit came tiptoeing over to you, and when I heard him inviting you to play poker I could have stabbed him with my hatpin. I saw him leave you and I saw you again, like the foolish boy you were, juggling with your wallet. And then I decided to speak up—"

"Good Lord!" groaned Buddy. "And all the time I thought you were some sort of a rival bunko artist!"

"You had some right to be suspicious, I suppose," she told him after a reflective glance. "I'm not very experienced at making acquaintances on trains, and I must have appeared horrid. But all the time I was such a weak-willed little goose I didn't dare tell you the truth. Well, when the blond one in the grey suit came over to you again and you urged me to hurry up—I—did my best to make you stay."

"You couldn't have chopped me away with an adz," he

informed her. "You remember I followed him clean across the car to tell him nothing doing with the game."

"Yes," she said slowly, "and here's the place where I hesitate."

He looked closely and saw that she was blushing until tears had come.

"It was a dreadful thing to do—but you see I'd made up my mind; so the minute you left the seat to follow that gambler I reached into your overcoat—it was lying right beside me—and took out your wallet. I wasn't even ashamed, because I was determined you shouldn't have that money to throw away until you'd gotten as far as Denver at least. I smuggled it into my handbag and tried to look innocent when you came back and sat down. It was dreadful."

"Poor kid!" He said this in spite of himself.

"Oh, the worst is yet to come. I was scared blue every minute for fear you'd take up your overcoat and find the money gone. I was wild to give it back to you or to warn you against them or something. But I was in a perfect whirl. It must take a dreadful amount of practice and self-control to be crooked for a living. At any rate I was relieved when the train stopped and you asked me to walk with you on the platform. I was afraid to leave my bag behind, so I took it with me. I don't think I should have held out ten minutes longer. I wanted to scream and tell you to take your money back. And of course in my idiotic state of mind I did the worst thing possible. The conductor shouted 'All aboard!' I was plainly rattled. I turned the wrong way, looking for the Altazooana, which we had just left, and poor Cora made matters worse by dragging me aboard the Alazama, across the platform. The names, you see, were so nearly alike, and the points of the compass never meant anything to me out West. So I

didn't see my mistake until the door was locked and we found ourselves steaming the wrong way.

"The train, I found, was bound right back to Colorado Springs; and you were on your way to Denver as fast as you could scoot. I was in a miserable silly panic. As soon as I could collect my wits I opened your wallet; and what I found inside didn't make me feel any calmer—eleven thousand five hundred dollars; I went into a few hysterics, and Cora, who never had any sense, began to cry too. I should have notified the conductor, Dad says; and if I had I suppose some sort of telegram would have been sent on to head you off. But I'd lost the little sense I ever had; and the idea of going right back to Colorado Springs and facing my family was more than I could stand.

"Finally I made up my mind that whatever happened I wouldn't go back to my family. So I got hold of Cora and dragged her off at the first stop. I found there were no other trains going through to Denver before early morning. Cora and I, clinging together like two babes in the wood, hunted up a sort of hotel; but just as we were going upstairs to our room I looked back and saw those four card sharps registering at the desk. For some reason or other—and they had a good reason, I suppose—they had dropped off at the same little station. They got the next room to ours, and poor Cora and I sat up all night—we'd pushed the bureau against the door—and for hours we listened to them swearing and quarrelling and breaking glasses."

She shuddered quite appropriately.

"The gamblers were all snoring when we got away for the early morning train. I told everything to Daddy as soon as he got back to New York. He suggested my depositing the money and trying to find you."

Buddy McNair sat reflectively watching two demoiselle

cranes bobbing up and down in the figures of the spring dance. Her eyes as he looked shyly round were wonderfully appealing; he was too engrossed to marvel that another woman's eyes could appeal so soon again. The story she had just told him caused his spirit to react with double severity against that life of sham and plunder upon which he had forever turned his back. Out of the exotics and the neurotics he had come not unscathed but still able to enjoy; and here he was finding comfort in the deep blue eyes of an honest American girl of that splendid stock which makes our nation great forever.

"I hope you're going to forgive me," she was pleading ever so prettily when he came to.

"Yes. But there's one thing I'll always hold against you."

"Oh."

She drew away, abashed, then asked contritely: "What have I done—or what haven't I?"

"If you really wanted to save me from those crooks," he said accusingly, "you should have gathered in my whole wad while you were about it—nearly three hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"I don't quite understand—"

"You will," said Buddy.

And the dam of silence broke. He told her all about himself in words of shame and honesty. Through his first encounter with the Blints, and the mad servants' party at Terry Overbeek's, the still madder purchase of the pearls, he worked climactically up to Mrs. Dyvenot and disillusionment. He found a sister confessor upon whom to ease his troubled spirit.

"You poor, poor boy!" she moaned. "Why in the world did you do all that?"

"Up in the mountains I'd been laughing at tenderfeet

XXIII

YOU'VE got to come home with me and help square things," she told him as soon as they had started back on the El. "I never did such a dreadful thing before—and I want to show you as evidence when I break the news to Moms about the wallet."

"I wish I'd brought my gun," grinned Buddy.

"Mercy! None of us know a thing about shooting."

"Neither do I," declared the man from Axe Creek with his customary candour.

At last they got off at the Ninth Street station and started briskly cross town through a jumble of shabby flats, which told Buddy, at first, that the Harrisons did not live in an opulent neighbourhood. As they crossed Broadway and turned into Twelfth Street, however, Buddy changed his mind, for the jumble grew into order. Somewhere church bells were chiming, imparting romance to the spring evening. West of Fifth Avenue a pretty residence section came into view—modest brick houses with white doors and shiny brass knobs; no sign of splendour, only what Terry Overbeek would have pronounced solid bourgeois, domestic comfort. Tulips were glowing in many window boxes; Buddy paused a moment and looked back upon a cross section of Fifth Avenue, showing the brilliant green sides of a passing bus.

Martha Harrison stopped in front of one of the simple brick houses, which was distinguished by its trim white sashes and smart window boxes.

"We live here," she said, pulling a brassy knob. They

stood together in the small vestibule awaiting a response.

"You stay by me while I tell mother," she whispered with the sidelong look of a naughty child.

A neat maid in frivolous white cap and apron opened the door. There was something surprisingly reminiscent about the girl's mysterious intriguing air as she took his hat and coat. She never looked at him, but Buddy stood wondering just where before and under what peculiar circumstances he had encountered that languishing pose.

Martha Harrison, who with a graceful word had excused herself and started up the stairs, turned and said to the memory-haunting maid-servant:

"Annette, show Mr. McNair into the drawing-room."

As the maid swung open the drawing-room door Buddy looked again, more carefully this time. She had cryptic eyes of an Egyptian cast; her face was interestingly aristocratic, conveying memories of a green gown and jewelled headdress. She looked slyly up the stairs before admitting that she recognised him.

"How do you do, Marquise?" he inquired cordially.

"But Monsieur McNair!" She came close to him and spoke rapidly, her expression approximating that of Theda Bara in her deeper moments. "You have not told?"

"About the servants' ball?" he grinned.

"S-s-s-s-st! Not so loud, please!"

"Oh, I wouldn't peach on a friend like that," he informed her as one confederate to another.

"It would cost me my place," she tragically declared.

"I'm still as a dead horse." Then the situation appealed to him so vividly that he could not refrain from asking, "Afraid she'll know you borrowed her green dress?"

"Not so much that," she hissed. "But if Mrs. Harrison should know that I had been associating with Overbeeks she would dismiss me without a reference."

ever since I was a kid. I suppose I had this coming to me. I wasn't in a position to protect myself. You see, I thought I was meeting the best people and—”

“Poor, poor boy!” she repeated in much the tone she might have used on a bulldog after an unsuccessful fight. “Why did I let him escape me that day in Colorado?”

“Wasn't it sort of natural that I should have been stung?” he asked, making a faint show of self-defence.

“It all comes from reading those Sunday supplements,” she mused. Presently she rose.

“Good gracious!” she exclaimed. “It's time to be starting back and we haven't seen a single animal.”

Buddy addressed himself to a passing attendant whose drooping moustaches, bovine eyes and hulking figure gave him an appearance not unlike that of a uniformed walrus.

“Where's the elephant house?”

The attendant pointed a grey-clad flipper, and together the romantic wanderers followed the sparse crowd through the swinging glass doors.

The tall African elephant, swaying hypnotically on his nine-foot shoulders, passed out the long rubber tube by which he begged. Martha Harrison, who had concealed a segment of doughnut in her pocket, looked guiltily round for the keeper ere attaching the morsel to the vacuum-cleaner end of the waving trunk.

“It'll give the old darling dyspepsia,” she said humanely. “Isn't he lovely!”

She also displayed a quite natural interest in the pygmy Liberian hippopotamuses; but Buddy's mind was wandering to a new and sarcastic whimsy.

“There's an animal over there,” said he, pointing to a cage, “that looks like a razorback hog with a Hebrew nose.”

“That's the South American tapir, silly,” she scolded. “Can't you read the sign?”

"Hm!" mused the transplanted mountaineer as soon as they had moved over and taken in the trim little beast with the elephantine snout.

"Now just what county in the Animal Kingdom would a combination like that occupy?" he inquired. His right hand had stolen into his coat pocket, where he could feel the half dozen false pearls clicking together like a disagreeable reminder of his mistakes.

"I suppose he's a species of pig," he heard Martha Harrison explain. "Of course I'm not up on zoölogy any more. At school I used to think that anything with two cylinders should be called a bivalve."

Buddy had taken the six shining marbles out of his pocket and was holding them reflectively.

"A species of pig!" he drawled, looking dreamily down at the trophies in his palm.

And on an impulse he tossed Mrs. Dyvenot's pretty counterfeits, one at a time, through the bars and into the hay right under the South American tapir's prominent nose.

"What in the world?" gasped Martha Harrison.

"Casting 'em before swine," said Buddy McNair.

"Oh. But he isn't a regular pig."

"No. And these aren't regular pearls."

He stood there shuffling nervously, because these confidences always made him ill at ease.

"Is he still alive?"

"Oh no. He died when I was a kid. He wasn't an American citizen and nobody seemed to know why he came to Axe Creek. He was a University of Dublin man and made his living doing odd jobs round the camp."

"He must have been a most interesting gentleman," she said softly.

The seeming snobbishness of the remark jarred against his newly pledged democracy.

"I don't think you'll find that word in Axe Creek—the way you say it here," he gruffly reminded her.

"Don't misunderstand me," she besought. "I don't mean that he was a runaway earl. But he must have been a man of aspirations and ideals."

"I suppose he was. He was a man whose life had been bumped into pretty hard, I guess. He used to take me out on the rocks down the gulch at the quiet hour a little after sunset. There he'd sit puffing away at one of the good cigars he couldn't really afford, and after a while he would point out the evening star—Venus. It's much brighter in the high mountains."

"And what would he say?" she asked.

"He could always talk like a house afire. His English sounded affected to me then. He'd begin by explaining how the evening star was millions of miles away, but rolling along by the same law and systems of law that make right right or wrong wrong; how the planets, floating like bubbles of fire in a sea of ether, are fixed and solid as the facts of life; how people ought to look up at the star whenever it's in the sky and resolve to obey the laws of life, which keep even Venus on her course."

"I told you!" she cried triumphantly. "He had aspirations and ideals."

"Yes. And he drank himself to death. After all, he was an Irishman."

XXIV

IT must have gotten round among Mrs. Dyvenot's friends that Buddy McNair was *persona non grata* in the neat little apartment house just off Madison Avenue. He was no longer badgered with smart invitations; and Middleton Knox, reliable barometer that he was, met him on the street and, to put it baldly, cut him dead. All this was a relief to Buddy, since it saved him the trouble of refusing that which he no longer desired. He shunned the clubs at which Van Laerens had introduced him—indeed, during the three or four days following his Arcadian adventures with Martha Harrison he spent most of his energy watching a barren mail or listening for a telephone call which never came. He was beginning to worry about this Martha Harrison. Had she thought him over and concluded that he wouldn't do? Had she decided to drop him after an afternoon of amusing play? Probably he had stayed too long upon his first visit and permitted himself to become tiresome with his confidences. At any rate Martha Harrison did not fulfil her promise to ask him again to Twelfth Street on a mission of squaring things with her mother.

Several times Buddy had begun taking stock of his things with a view to seeking Axe Creek and oblivion. But he had always weakened. Decision seemed to have gone out of his character; he was too low in spirits even to feel a keen disappointment in this new failure. Yet every morning he continued to look for some sort of note from her, and the mail brought him nothing but more bills, to

eat a little farther into the contents of his returned wallet.

He might have called to her over the telephone at any time; undoubtedly he would have resorted to this very simple expedient had it not been for the fear of announcing his existence to Mrs. Harrison before the time was ripe for revelation. No. It was getting plainer and plainer that Martha Harrison, like the others, had passed him on as soon as he had served his purpose. Perhaps the young man he had seen with her in the hansom cab was claiming all her time. Buddy devoted much speculation to Miss Harrison's case during these empty days.

On Wednesday morning Jass, who had continued to dangle on the job, brought in the mail; and Buddy was heartened to see a square of nice stationery addressed in rather a dashing hand. It was from Martha's mother and it said:

My dear Mr. McNair: My daughter has just told me about that dreadful prank. I want you to believe that we're not entirely depraved, and I was wondering if you couldn't dine with us Wednesday at half past seven. I am ever so anxious that you should see our gentler side!

Very sincerely yours

MARIETTA HARRISON.

The news had such good effect upon Buddy that he came at once out of his spell and began to look round him. And now for the first time he noticed that Jass, Jr., was still there and that Jass, Sr., was not. However he held his peace until that evening when he was dressing to dine with the Harrison family. It was Jascomb, indeed, who first broke the silence.

"Might I ask, sir, if I continue to give satisfaction?"

"What's eating you now, Jass?"

"I had a fear that perhaps my nationality——"

"Afraid folks round New York might call you an undesirable alien when they find you're an American citizen?"

"Oh no, sir. But so many gentlemen—"

"Yes, I see. They want the imported article. No. I haven't got any prejudice against American help."

"Thank you, sir."

"What's become of your father?"

"He decided to return to South Bend."

"Old man gave you up as a bad job?"

"Well, sir, he came to my opinion after a while. You see I have been in another profession so long; and the patrons of his department store might not understand, in a manner of speaking—"

"Jass," commanded his employer suddenly, "who's the woman?"

"I beg pardon?"

Jascomb backed slightly away, looking as though he had been caught stealing spoons.

"Who's the woman keeping you from leaving New York?"

"She's a Miss Pollemius, sir," confessed Jascomb readily enough. "A Finnish lady employed in the 'Otel Merlinbilt."

"Go to it, Jass."

"Thank you, sir. And Mr. McNair, if I might inquire—"

In the act of handing his master his freshly ironed hat he paused irresolute.

"Well, what's on your mind?"

"Did I understand you to say, sir, that you might be going away from New York?"

"I've changed my mind," said Buddy McNair, and escaped for fear that Jass might turn the tables with the question, "Who's the woman?"

He had made an excuse to telephone Martha Harrison

this morning after her mother's note came, and she had said in her natural way, "Just a family dinner."

"Mr. Blint once asked me to a family dinner," Buddy had objected, "and when I got there I found the royal family and all the crown jewels."

"Not with us. Just father and mother and me."

On his ride downtown Buddy decided that this was the very thing he liked about her. She was so fearfully bourgeois, as Doris Blint would have said—or at least she gave a natural, honest aspect to everything she touched. She didn't inflame him as Mrs. Dyvenot had done; when he thought of Martha Harrison he thought of having found something he had always needed, nothing more. He wasn't driving himself constantly by the force of powerful and dangerous drugs. It was all so natural, so right.

And as he rode along, past the electrically outlined clock of the Metropolitan Tower, past Twenty-third Street's drying river of trade, down the white-globed vista of lamps which fedges the shining pavement of lower Fifth Avenue, he laughed at the self that was yesterday. He didn't care if she wasn't rich, if she wasn't centred in the limelight, if she and her family lived in an obscure street and had nothing in common with what the Sunday papers call society. Terry Overbeek had seen too clearly for a drunken man when he had warned Buddy to be free of pretence, to seek his kind.

Jubilating in his new self Buddy McNair pulled the brass bell knob. The ex-marquise demurely admitted him; and when he had been shown into the West Twelfth Street drawing-room a coal fire was again glowing under the quaint marble mantel, just as he had hoped it would be. A comfortably buxom lady rose from a wing chair by the hearth and dimpled as she greeted him. She introduced herself as Mrs. Harrison; and it was easy to see that she

was Martha's mother. Her eyes held the same glowing kindness, and her hair, which was dark and turning slightly grey, rippled over the ears as Martha's did; it was dressed high, and Buddy felt that he had not seen a more distinguished head in New York. In a soft black gown with its square *décolletage* and the black velvet band clasped by diamonds round her throat she wore her age charmingly, for she was still a very pretty woman.

"Martha is always late," she told him. "And my husband is getting to be such a tramp he behaves outrageously whenever I ask him to dress. Do sit down. Martha tells me she has been showing you New York. I hope she didn't wear you out."

"My great mistake," complained Buddy, "was in tackling New York without a guide."

"You shouldn't do that!" she laughed.

A tall thin gentleman with a somewhat bulbous nose, tiny grey moustache and humorous grey eyes came shambling in. He wore a dinner jacket, and his black cravat had slipped off its centre, showing his collar button.

"Oh, Topper!" cried Mrs. Harrison, her eye on the gold button. "This is Mr. McNair," she explained, dragging forth the unruly Topper, "and this"—to Buddy—"is my flighty daughter's father."

Mr. Harrison gave a grin which was half a wink and took his guest's hand man-fashion, as they do out West.

"So this is the young man Martha's been practising on!" He grinned a little to one side and shook his guest's hand thoroughly before letting go.

"Sit down, McNair!" he invited heartily. "I hope Annette's going to have those cocktails in pretty soon!"

At this moment Martha herself came into the room. She was wearing a green gown with gold straps over the shoulders. Annette, passing in with a trayful of filled

glasses, glanced once at the gown, then at Buddy; and she came dangerously near spilling the cocktails into Mrs. Harrison's lap.

"Well, here's Martha herself," gibed Mr. Harrison, holding his glass under his pear-shaped nose. "You know Mr. McNair?—now that's a foolish question, isn't it?"

"I can see where my daughter gets her eccentricities," chimed in Mrs. Harrison, looking admiringly at Martha.

"You notice," winked Mr. Harrison, "how I agree to everything? I'm a tamed man."

"Daddy could be a lot tamer," came in Martha.

"What do you expect of me? When my daughter goes about gathering fortunes out of strange young gentlemen's overcoats? Inherited criminality."

"You can laugh at it all you please," insisted Mrs. Harrison, attempting to look severe. "But I shall die of grief some day—"

"Well, here's to grief!" upspoke the elder, lifting his glass. Buddy noticed that Martha had not taken a cocktail. He was far from being a prude, yet somehow he liked her the better for it.

In the pale walled dining room they sat down under silver sconces round a capable dining table garnished with a few pink roses. There was plenty of that plain junky silver about.

"My daughter has been telling me the strangest Robinson Crusoe adventures," said Mrs. Harrison after the soup.

"Robinson Crusette, my dear!" blinked Mr. Harrison. "You remember, that our daughter is nothing if not a feminist."

"Daddy!" appealed Martha. "I thought you at least were going to stick by me."

"To the end," declared her father. "Long time ago I

decided to close my eyes and give my blanket approval to everything."

"No wonder Martha has reverted to a state of savagery," sighed his wife.

"Let's talk some more about Robinson Crusette," suggested Mr. Harrison, helping himself liberally to ripe olives. "Martha, you've read Defoe more recently than I. Wasn't it old Robinson Crusoe who——"

"He's going to say something atrocious, I know—you'll have to get used to him, Mr. McNair," apologised Martha, pretending deep shame of her parent.

"I was merely asking a question which every schoolboy should know."

"Don't delude yourself into thinking that you're still a schoolboy," cut in his wife.

"Now, Daddy," suggested Martha, "you've got some awful question about Robinson Crusoe. You might as well get it off your mind."

"Well, then, wasn't it old Robinson Crusoe who did quite a brisk business lying in wait for goats and skinning them?"

"Topper!" cried Mrs. Harrison, horrified.

"Daddy, you ought to get down on your knees before Mr. McNair and ask him to try to forgive you," said Martha.

"Don't mind me," Buddy implored, entering into the spirit of the game. "In the first place it served me right for being a goat. In the second place it isn't every goat who gets his skin taken care of and returned in such fine condition."

"You see," upspoke the daughter, "he doesn't mind. He's even grateful."

"How does she do it?" asked her father with another of his wise blinks in Buddy's direction.

"You see, Mr. McNair, we have to bully Martha occa-

sionally. It's our only way of reminding her that we're still her parents."

"Colorado Springs!" Martha Harrison hissed in a black-mailer's whisper.

"She always holds that over him," dimpled Mrs. Harrison. "It intimidates him at once."

"Can't you be chivalrous?" inquired her father.

"Just like a man!" Mrs. Harrison pointed this out. "Calmly turning all the unpleasant work over to his female relations!"

And so the merry war went on through fish and roast. The food was good, well cooked, plentiful and unornamental. The chaffing among the Harrisons had always an intimate and affectionate quality—the manner of give and take possible only among a group who have kept false reservations and mean grudges out of their long relationship. There was none of the malicious sting to it that Buddy had always sensed in the humorous spats between Gertie Van Laerens and her Plummie; there was none of the sweet venom with which Sally Dyvenot ambushed the confederates whom at heart she distrusted or despised. Mr. Harrison went at it a bit roughshod at times; but the Harrison family gave the impression of three merry passengers all in the same boat. The fact that they wasted nothing on palaver or terms of endearment seemed to establish very clearly the love that lay among them. To Mrs. Harrison her husband was Topper, to Mr. Harrison his wife was Midd. From their conversation Buddy gathered that she did a great deal of church work; but there was nothing sanctimonious about her. Harrison apparently was engaged in some business downtown. Evidently he was a man who never took his business worries to table with him.

As the plates were being laid for dessert the host came

back again to the theme of his daughter's brief course in criminality.

"If I were going into robbery as a profession——" he began, and was interrupted by his wife.

"Oh, give poor Martha a chance to reform."

"I was just saying what I'd do—I've often considered criminality as a profession. But I should think it would be good technic for the operator, before operating, to learn a little something about the patient. Just as the surgeon makes you put your name, address and occupation on a piece of paper before he begins whetting his shears. Now see what happened to Martha."

"Oh, heaven!" implored the afflicted daughter.

"She found herself on a train with eleven thousand five hundred dollars clean profit in her hand bag. And she didn't know your name, and she thought you were a wholesale druggist in a town named Tomahawk Valley. Of course she was quite vague, poor child. But I've a curiosity to know."

"Axe Creek, Colorado; altitude nine thousand, two hundred and twenty-six feet," explained Buddy. "My business is extracting gold from low-grade ore by a process known as the Supercyanide."

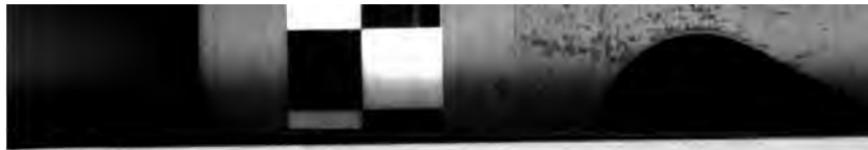
"I say!" Mr. Harrison blinked at him with his bright grey eyes. "You don't happen to be Gilbert K. McNair, do you?"

"The name's still mine," modestly admitted the genius.

"And did you invent the Supercyanide Process?"

"Yes," said Buddy. "Long ago, when I was a useful member of society."

"By George!" Harrison pushed aside his finger bowl so roughly as to splash the doily. "Why, you're just about all of Colorado!"



"That was my hallucination," said Buddy, "until I came to New York."

"My principal regret when I was in Colorado Springs was that my family worried me into such a state of health that I wasn't able to make a pilgrimage and look you up. Hack drivers showing people round the Garden of the Gods stop in the midst of the scenery and say, 'But you ought to see Buddy McNair!' Why, they've got more myths about you than they can tell on Helen Hunt Jackson."

"I guess that's about what I am," acknowledged Buddy with a touch of sadness, reflecting rapidly on what New York had done to him thus far, "a myth."

"Well, there isn't every man who can have Achilles sit right down at his own table and tell what Homer left out," exclaimed the elder. "And I hope you won't think me a bore if I ask you to do that very thing."

"I've been so busy working it out," Buddy modestly declared, "that I haven't had time to learn much about it."

There came a pause. Everybody was looking at him and he felt a vain heart throb when he saw the kind eyes of Martha Harrison contemplating him with a sort of proprietorial pride.

"Here's a yarn to show how much I know about it," he went on, apparently being expected to talk. "Last week life in New York sort of got on my nerves, so I went up to the Museum of Natural History to take a look at the fossils, thinking I might get comfort out of seeing something that was deader than I was. Well, I'd just walked nine times round the skeleton of the giant brontosaurus—that's a mile, I think—when I saw a sign on the wall that almost woke me up. There, in big black letters, was the name of Professor Crackenhorse, the eminent metallurgist, with nearly all the alphabet lined up behind him; and it

announced that the professor would give a free lecture at half past two on the subject of the Supercyanide Process of Gold Reduction. Being the inventor, so to speak, I had a sort of morbid interest in hearing about what I had done, so I hunted up the lecture hall. I was late, I guess, because Professor Crackenhorse stopped his talk to let me find a seat.

"He was a neat little man with a short beard and sad eyes that looked as though he had been disappointed in an early love. The wall behind him was all covered with charts and chemical formulas. He had a cold, and every time he rubbed his nose it got redder and redder. I couldn't make out very much about my process from what he said; but I got the impression that it was done by a series of reactions. He had about two hundred of 'em, all divided into groups. Before I had been there fifteen minutes I came to the conclusion that I hadn't discovered the Supercyanide Process after all, because I didn't recognise any, of my work in what the professor was talking about.

"I began to get sort of hot and heavy round the eyeballs. I'd been up late a lot that week and the lecture hall was warm and comfortable—too comfortable. Professor Crackenhorse and the pile of books on the table and the double row of old maids taking notes got all scrambled together. I kept taking long breaths in hopes of keeping awake, but the professor's voice grew farther and farther away.

"After a while I woke up. I guess I must have had a good nap, because the lights were all on in the room and the chairs were empty—nobody there except the professor, who was gathering together his papers and jamming 'em into one of those little leather carryalls. I thought maybe I'd speak to him and introduce myself as the inventor, but

as he came down the aisle he looked so fierce that I changed my mind and settled back in my chair. He stopped and glared at me through his little plate-glass spectacles.

"'Young man,' says he, 'how do you ever expect to learn anything if you can't keep awake during lectures?'"

A half hour later, when they were puffing their big black cigars in front of the little white mantel, Buddy found himself lecturing quite affably on the subject of low-grade ores and the application of cyanogen. Mr. Harrison knew far more about his process than Buddy imagined an Easterner could know; and the deference with which his opinions were received gave him for the first time the feeling of being somebody of real importance in the world. The old gentleman had a keen appetite for facts; he had been a traveller and a citizen of many ports. Always focusing his practical common sense on things as they are, his talk could skip nimbly from reminiscences of student days in Paris to observations of European politics or mining conditions in South Africa. And when he talked the women folk held their peace.

Buddy was quite amazed at time's annihilation when the ex-marquise entered and announced that his car was at the door. And when Mrs. Harrison, as handshakes were being passed round, invited him to go with them to somebody's picture exhibition on the morrow afternoon he all but swooned with gratitude. For he had read in Martha Harrison's sweet blue eyes an interest that put enchantment into the prospect of tramping round and round the circle of a crowded art gallery.

When the door closed at last upon this new and pleasant aspect of New York Buddy McNair paused just a moment at the wrought-iron railing in front of Martha Harrison's

house and yielded one grateful glance to the smart Colonial brick.

"Whoever they are," said he, "they're certainly peaches!" And he grinned all over as he ordered his chauffeur to drive him back to his apartment.

XXV

MAY warmed into June and, as *Gossips' Weekly* was so penetrating as to point out, "everybody that was anybody" had flown "like birds of passage" to plume fine feathers along cool beaches in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. From the same periodical Buddy learned that Mrs. Dyvenot had taken a cottage at Bar Harbor for the summer, and from this concluded that she had been lucky in again selling the Overbeek pearls. Every body who was anybody had migrated, but Buddy McNair, who was nobody but himself now, was lingering in town for one perfectly valid reason; and that Reason was staying rather late in New York.

On the morning of June the second Buddy McNair awoke pleasantly on his pillow to the snarl of shade rollers which the still faithful Jass was pushing upward for the day. His bath was roaring in the tub and Jass was moving about like a black spectre, tidying up the place.

"Any mail, Jass?"

"Yes, sir. Will you have your tub——"

"I want my mail right away. I've sort of got a hunch."

Like all good hunches it was timed on scientific probabilities; and sure enough there was a letter from Bonyear & Cole, inclosing a statement of June royalties.

"Doc Naylor was right!" whistled and sang Buddy McNair, contemplating the figures and realising that the industry had grown by fifty per cent.

Doc Naylor had been right in so many things. Right when he had told Buddy that every man must prosper

according to his investment. Right when he had said that a million dollars' worth of foolishness would bring in a million dollars' worth of headache. Right when he had said that you couldn't build a house out of fancy wall paper; you had to put together a solid foundation and stick on the fixin's afterward.

And Buddy McNair, after throwing away a lot of mussed and tattered wall paper, ruinously paid for, was starting in on a new foundation. Last week he had proposed to Martha Harrison and had been accepted. There had been nothing stormy or headlong about it. They had talked it over in their candid fashion and it had turned out that there was nothing else to do to be happy. There hadn't been any cross currents or horrible suspicions. Her yes had been incapable of any misconstruction. It had given him power and a wonderful new confidence in himself, nothing of that eagerly abject feeling he had experienced all the while he was pranking before Mrs. Dyvenot, feverish to please on the end of his chain.

When Buddy plunged into the cold tub this morning he was singing, and he came up singing. Martha had agreed with him that it should be a short engagement. They'd go out West and get acquainted with Doc Naylor. Maybe they would build the big cabin beyond the Little Divide. What a wonderful girl she would be to go wandering the world with! How glad he was that he had hearkened to the word of a drunkard that ghastly night when Overbeek had astounded him with revelations. He had gone forth and gotten himself a real woman, thought Buddy, a girl without social pretensions and false glitter; her social limits were the limits of humanity—no fuss, no feathers, no unhealthy yearnings after country houses and yards of pearls! They were orchids, those people among whom he had lingered long enough to feel disgust—poisonous para-

sites without a tendril on the ground. Martha Harrison graced the earth from which she sprang. That was her charm.

So reflected Buddy McNair, ecstatically stepping into his red Morocco slippers and taking his morning place at the dining table. Jass, who had brought in the papers with the coffee, stood by his master's chair. In this hour of economy Jass was taking the place of both cook and butler.

"I beg pardon, sir," said the Anglo-Indianian.

He was folding and unfolding the morning papers in a most significant way.

"Don't rub all the news off the front page," suggested Buddy. "What's on your mind now?"

"Would it be convenient to grant me a week's vacation, beginning this afternoon?"

"Nothing's impossible, Jass. What would you do with it?"

"Miss Pollemius and I were wishing to take our 'oney-moon, sir."

"That sounds convenient. Contemplating marriage after that?"

"Oh, no, sir!" in a properly shocked tone. "We're to be married this afternoon in the Third Lutheran Church."

"Well, now I like that! Not inviting me?"

"I was thinking, sir, as how you might not be interested."

"That's the finest specimen of snobbery I've seen yet. Of course you can have your week off—but if you don't ask me to the wedding I'll blow up the church."

"I'm sure, sir, we should feel extremely honoured."

Buddy took this to be an invitation for him to come with or without dynamite.

"You'd better go round to Twillaway's and pick out something worth about five hundred dollars."

"Thank you, sir."

"By the way, Jass, I suppose you've heard——"

"That you are contemplating matrimony, sir?"

"Where in hell did you get that?"

"Out of the Morning Harpsichord, sir. Sixth page, column two."

Jass handed out the paper, which Buddy was quick to open. There was a long, well-headlined column devoted to his happiness; and he was able to read many facts about the good sensible young lady he was determined to make his wife.

MISS MARTHA HAVEN HARRISON ENGAGED
Daughter of Corlear Haven Harrison
to Marry Prominent Mining Man

"Yesterday at a luncheon given to a few of her friends Mrs. Corlear Haven Harrison, of No. — West Twelfth Street, announced the engagement of her daughter, Miss Martha Haven Harrison, to Mr. Gilbert Kernochan McNair, of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"Miss Harrison made her début several years ago and was one of the belles of her season. She has been prominent in the work of the Junior League and is well known for her exceedingly clever acting with the Comedy Club. Two years ago she held the ladies' national championship for tennis singles.

"At the time when Mr. Corlear Haven Harrison was abroad as special envoy in connection with the Bolingbroke-Horner Treaty she was presented at the Spring Drawing-Room, her uncle, Mr. Tertius van Zoom, being at that time our Ambassador at the Court of St. James.

"Mrs. Harrison, who was Miss Henrietta van Zoom, daughter of the celebrated yachtsman, is sister of the present Countess of Shroveberry and—"

Buddy McNair took a long breath. There was a great deal more about Mrs. Harrison's aunts, cousins, uncles and

all their in-laws; in fact, the article dwelt lovingly on the subject of the Van Zooms to within three lines of the bottom of the page; and these three lines were entirely given over to Mr. McNair.

"Mr. Gilbert Kernochan McNair, who is prominent for his numerous mining activities in Colorado, is at present living in New York."

"Well, they've got one thing right about me," said Buddy at last, after much ruminating.

"I beg pardon, sir?" spoke the attentive Jass.

"I'm at present living in New York," admitted his master, again poring over the account of himself in brief.

"You certainly are," agreed Jass in a perfect Indiana accent.

That night the Harrisons, as a family, dined at Tanquay's with the Boston branch of the family, who had come flocking down for the good news. The Inverness Greys, second cousins, were plainly relieved because Martha wasn't going to turn out an old maid after all. There were two Brookline Harrisons, spinsters both; and to keep up the New York end, a Mrs. Van Zoom, a widow who quite apparently held herself very dear and regarded Buddy as an impending calamity.

"Poor Moms!" commiserated Martha confidentially to her parent. "If you've got to suffer there's no reason why the whole family——"

"Not so loud!" buzzed Mrs. Harrison aside just as they were going into the big dining room. "Something tells me that Cousin Innie's going to take us to the Provincetown Players. Why don't you and Buddy gobble something and run away to a movie?"

"Dear old Moms!" whispered her daughter. "I'm going to kiss you right here."

"If you dare!" threatened Mrs. Harrison.

Buddy sat enveloped in a rosy cloud through which he gobbled as directed. He only knew that a girl in a greenish gown with golden shoulder straps sat next to him and seemed as happy as himself. Martha, who managed all such things deftly, extracted him from the party at last.

"If you were any prettier," whispered her lover as they were going out, "you wouldn't be real."

"And if I weren't real I don't believe you'd follow me two steps."

"You've said it. Gosh, I'm crazy about that little old greeny dress!"

"I'm glad you're beginning to notice my clothes," she smiled teasingly.

"Oh, I noticed that a long time ago," he said, but didn't explain when and where.

"But I don't always wear the same thing," she informed him. "This is quite different from the others. Did you ever see another girl wearing a gown like this?"

"Never!"

Thus Buddy McNair, a slave to truth, lied like a gentleman to save the character of an excellent parlour maid.

They had put on their wraps and were standing by the revolving doors long enough to permit a modishly dressed couple to come in from the street.

"How do you do?" shrilled the feminine of the newcomers, twinkling her pencilled lashes under wonderfully barbered eyebrows. Her gown was ashimmer with silvery lace, her hair glossily pulled back from her enamelled forehead. It was Miss Doris Blint.

"How do you do?" echoed her companion in a tone that was modulated to warmth suggestive of a lifelong chumship. His weazel's face was puckered into lines of eager amiability,

his well-cut waistcoat was creased under bows of subservience. It was Middleton Knox.

Buddy shook hands all round and was cloyingly congratulated. He would have introduced the bride-to-be, but that young lady had pushed her way through the revolving door and was waiting for him on the steps outside.

"Did you see what I saw?" asked Buddy, joining her and strolling slowly toward Fifth Avenue.

"That horrid little pest, Middleton Knox? Nobody speaks to him, now that it's generally known that he makes a living writing slander for *Gossips' Weekly*."

"Great Henry's mother!" Buddy uttered his ultimate prayer. "And I was going to shoot that very writer."

"Oh, Buddy dear! Please don't go wreaking any dreadful Western vengeance!"

"I won't," he promised. "I'll leave him to a dreadful Eastern vengeance that has got death by gunshot skinned a mile."

"You scare me. Are you going to turn him over to torment?"

"You bet!"

He was thinking of Doris Blint.

They stood a moment at a Fifth Avenue corner. In the patch of rose light over the skyscrapers one solitary star shone like a torch, reminding him of pearl-topped peaks, of deep, silent cañons, of a lone rock upon which crouched a little whimsical grey-eyed man, lean as a wolf and tragic as the mountain night.

"She ought to be in the East," that suave, educated voice was echoing in his ear. "She's so dressy and chic and highly polished, so brilliant and civilised."

Martha Harrison stood at his side. She was looking

at the star, too; and he was glad he had told her, however briefly, about his father.

"She's going West," said Martha to the sinking orb. "Good night, dear! She must be hanging right over Axe Creek by now."

"She is in the West," he conceded, and watched her glimmer beyond the Hudson.

Of course Martha couldn't understand everything. For instance, how could he convince her that he had come East largely because his sidereal map had become turned round? No. Only Doc Naylor had appreciated his state of mind when he had called Buddy a specialist in the scientifically impossible.

A great green bus, heavy with passengers on its upper deck, came swaying toward their corner.

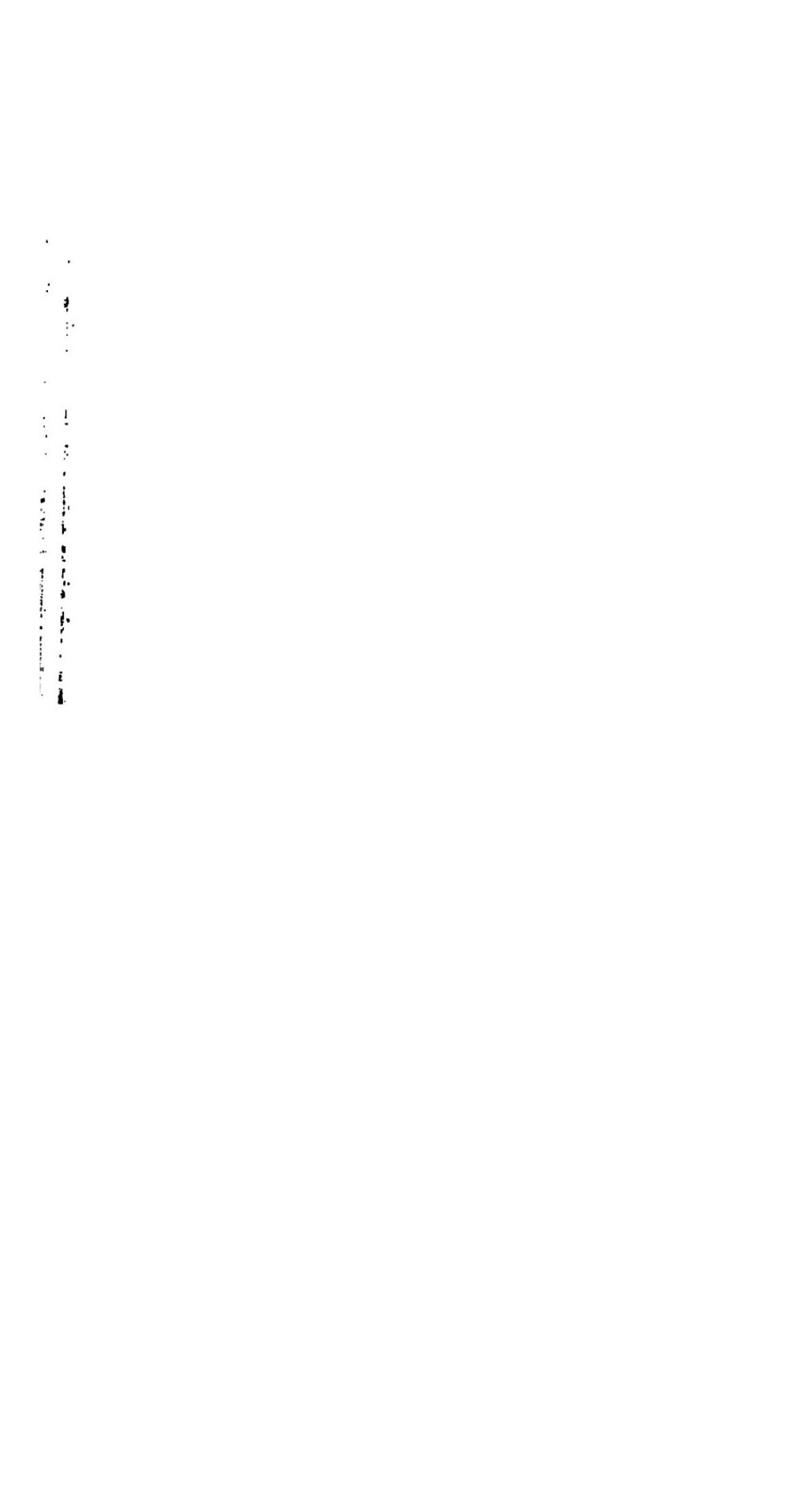
"Shall we go to a movie?" asked Buddy, who had locked his fingers with hers for a moment.

She looked dreamily up and down the vista of white lamps.

"Let's ride on top of the bus," said she. "Let's take the one that goes the long way, up to St. Nicholas Avenue and round. I've always wanted to ride on top of a bus on a lovely evening with somebody—who'd understand why I wanted to."

"Great Henry's mother and father!" cried Buddy McNair. "I just knew you would!"





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